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AMERICAN LITERATURE

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SYLLABI-BOOK MAPPING TABLE

AMERICAN LITERATURE

Syllabi	Mapping in Book
BLOCK I: PROSE Unit - I- Edger Allan Poe : The Philosophy of Composition Unit - II - Thoreau : Civil Disobedience Unit - III - Henry James: The Art of Fiction	**Unit 1:** The Philosophy of Composition Edgar Allan Poe **(Pages 1-4);** **Unit 2:** Civil Disobedience -Thoreau **(Pages 5-18);** **Unit 3:** The Art of Fiction - Henry James **(Pages 19-33)**
BLOCK II: POETRY Unit - IV - Edgar Allan Poe : The Raven Unit - V - Walt Whitman : When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed Unit - VI - Emily Dickinson : Because I Could Not Stop for Death, I Taste Liquor Never Brewed Unit - VII - Robert Frost : Mending Wall, Road Not Taken	**Unit 4:** The Raven Edgar Allan Poe **(Pages 34-48);** **Unit 5:** When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd - Walt Whitman **(Pages 49-63);** **Unit 6:** Because I Could Not Stop For Death - Emily Dickinson **(Pages 64-70);** **Unit 7:** I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed Emily Dickinson **(Pages 71-76)**
BLOCK III: FICTION Unit - VIII - Mark Twain : Adventures of Tom Sawyer Unit - IX - Toni Morrison : Sula Unit - X - Bernard Malamud : The Assistant Unit - XI - Richard Wright : Native Son	**Unit 8:** The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Mark Twain **(Pages 77-87);** **Unit 9:** The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Mark Twain **(Pages 88-94);** **Unit 10:** The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Mark Twain **(Pages 95-112);** **Unit 11:** Sula - Toni Morrison **(Pages 113-135)**

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Unit - XIV - Tennessee Williams : Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

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INTRODUCTION

American Literature is a book that aims to give a cohesive interpretation of the different impulses that went into the making of a separate canon called American Literature. It is widely accepted that the written or literary work produced in the United States and its preceding colonies is the birthplace of this canon. During its early history, America was a series of British colonies on the eastern coast of the present day United States. Its literary tradition, for this reason, begins as linked to the broader tradition of English literature. However, in the hands of a selected few, American literature took on a shape that was exclusive and gradually came to be associated with a strong sense of the New World aesthetics. American writers broke away from literary tradition and chose their own directions. They rejected the old in order to create something novel. The book will discuss works by some of the best known American literary figures such as Ernest Hemingway, Herman Melville, Tennessee Williams, Pearl S. Buck, Eugene O'Neil, Arthur Miller, and so on.

BLOCK - I
PROSE

NOTES

UNIT 1 THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION EDGAR ALLAN POE

Structure

1.0 INTRODUCTION

'The Philosophy of Composition' is an essay written by the famous American writer Edgar Allan Poe and published in the year 1846. Edgar Allan Poe elucidates a theory how the good writers write when they write well. In this essay, he discusses and justifies how he crafted his poem "The Raven" according to his own methods of focusing on order and beauty.

This essay first appeared in April 1846, in the issue of Graham's Magazine. It introduces three of Poe's theory in Literature which is contrast to the spontaneous creation of Coleridge and others. The three elements of his theory are: Length, Method and Unit of effect.

In this unit, we will study about these methods in his essay.

1.1 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Give brief note of Edgar Allan Poe's works.
- Critical analyze of this essay 'The Philosophy of Composition'
- Evaluate the three elements of Poe's composition of a good writing

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1.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edgar Allan Poe was born on January 19, 1809 in Boston Massachusetts. He was an editor, Journalist, poet, literary critic and short story writer. He lost his parent in his childhood and he was adopted by John and Frances Allen. He is best known for his gothic, horror, mystery tales and psychological dramas. He intuited the detective stories and science fiction.

Some of his famous works includes, ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’, ‘The Fall of the house of the Usher’, ‘The Premature Burial’, ‘The Masque of the Red Death’, ‘The Black Cat and other stories’ , ‘The Raven’ and so on. He traveled around in search of opportunity and he lived in poverty. His works are known for its sense of rhythm, word appeal or prose of lavish beauty and suggestiveness. He got a break when one of his short stories won a contest in ‘Baltimore Saturday Visitor’ and then he published many short stories and formulated rules for the short story writings in Literature.

He got reputation as a cut-throat critic and laid great stress upon correctness of language, meter and structure. He received the nick name “Tomahawk Man”. But his aggressive-reviewing style strained his relationship with his publication and so he left the magazine in the year 1837. He had important role in French Literature as a poetic master model and guide to criticism. The French symbolism trusted on his ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ borrowed from his imagery and used his examples to make the theory of pure poetry.

His career continued to work in different forms, examining his methodology and writings in several essays, including ‘The Philosophy of Composition’, ‘The Poetic Principle’ and ‘The Rationale of verse’. Some experts believed that he died of alcoholism in great distress. His last words were,’ Lord help my poor soul’.

1.3 CRITICAL APPRECIATION

In this unit, we will critically examine the essay.

‘The Philosophy of Composition’ analyzes Poe’s views on how to write a poem, short story, or any other works in Literature. The three theories are length, methods and unit of effects. He chooses his own famous poem, ‘The Raven’ as an example to examine the composition. Some of the writers claim that Poe didn’t exactly follow his own rules for all his writings.

In his three theories of composition, he puts forth the length of the literary work first. He states that all length work should be short. He writes, “There is a distant limit…”in emphasizes with poetry. He claims that short story is superior to the novel for this reason. He states that the literary work should be kept short enough so the reader could read in one sitting otherwise if it is too long it would distract the reader from the effect of the work.

Furthermore he shows that his poem, 'The Raven' was neither an accident not an intuition but a work written "with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem". According to him, a literary work should be written out of artistic intuition, it should be like mathematical problem, where there must be a method to follow step by step. His view is in contrast to the spontaneous creation of Coleridge. But he himself states that no writer would accept this point.

Poe has a conviction that only author has to decide how it has to end and what emotional effect it has to create to the reader. He calls this as the unit of effect. After deciding on this effect, the author has to set the composition of the work includes tone, setting, theme, characters, conflict and plot. And a literary work should have its originality in using alliteration and rhyme.

Poe claims that he has followed all these aspects in the poem 'The Raven'. He states that he purposely set the poem on stormy and calm evening that makes the raven to find shelter. The description of the bust of Pallas also created purposely to create a notion of the scholar who is reading in order to forget his lost beloved.

He says he has deliberately used the words like 'Nevermore' and his lost beloved 'Lenore' on the basis of logic 'unit of effect'. The words with its vowel sounds are meant to symbolize mournful and never-ending remembrance in the poem.

Check Your Progress

1. What are the three theories of Poe in composition of a literary work?
2. Which poem did he choose to illustrate his theories?
3. What is the nickname of Poe?
4. When did this essay get publish?

1.4 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. The three elements are Length, Method, and Unit of effects
2. He had chosen, his famous poem, 'The Raven' to illustrate.
3. His nick name is " Tomahawk Man".
4. This essay got published in the year 1846.

1.5 SUMMARY

- 'The Philosophy of Composition' is an essay written by the famous American writer Edgar Allan Poe.
- This essay first appeared in April 1846, in the issue of Graham's Magazine.

- The three elements of his theories are: Length, Method and Unit of effect.
- He chooses his own famous poem, 'The Raven' as an example to examine the composition
- He states that all length work should be short.
- He shows that his poem, 'The Raven' was neither an accident not an intuition but a work written "with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem".
- Poe has a conviction that only author has to decide how it has to end and what emotional effect it has to create to the reader.
- He states that he purposely set the poem on stormy and calm evening that makes the raven to find shelter.
- And a literary work should have its originality in using alliteration and rhyme.
- He says he has deliberately used the words like 'Nevermore' and his lost beloved 'Lenore' on the basis of logic 'unit of effect'.

1.6 KEY WORDS

- Intuition – The ability to understand something instinct.
- Unit of effect- The effect that creates on the mind of reader.
- Alliteration –the occurrence of the same word or sound.

1.7 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

1. When was 'The Philosophy of Composition' published?
2. What are the three theories of composition?
3. Why did he write this essay?

Long-Answer Questions

1. Give the summary of the essay 'The Philosophy of Composition'.
2. Describe how Poe has explained his theories in illustrating his poem, 'The Raven'.

UNIT 2 CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE -THOREAU

NOTES

Structure

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Thoreau wrote "Civil Disobedience," first titled "Resistance to Civil Government" when it was published in the periodical Aesthetic Papers, in response to questions about why he had gone to jail. As an abolitionist, he had objected to the Massachusetts poll tax and refused to pay it as a protest against slavery. When the Mexican War broke out in 1846, he protested against it as an aggressive war of conquest aimed in part at adding new slave territories to the United States, and for this reason as well, he refused to pay the tax. For several years, the authorities ignored Thoreau's nonpayment, but in July of 1846, Concord constable Sam Staples ordered Thoreau to pay up.

When Thoreau still failed to comply, Staples arrested him on July 23 or 24 and imprisoned him in the Middlesex County jail. That evening some unknown person paid Thoreau's fine, but Staples kept Thoreau in jail until after breakfast before releasing him. Emerson called Thoreau's action "mean and skulking, and in bad taste," and there is an apocryphal story that Emerson, visiting Thoreau in prison, asked, "Henry David, what are you doing in there?" to which he replied, "Ralph Waldo, what are you doing out there?" Bronson Alcott, however, called Thoreau a good example of "dignified noncompliance with the injunction of civil powers."

In the essay, Thoreau argues that laws, being human-made, are not infallible, that there is a higher divine law, and that when those laws conflict, one must obey the higher law. Hence slavery, no matter how legal (and it remained legal until 1865), was always unjust in its violation of the integrity and divine soul of the enslaved. So long as the American government upheld slavery, Thoreau said, one "cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also."

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2.1 OBJECTIVES

In "Civil Disobedience," philosopher Henry David Thoreau argues that citizens must disobey the rule of law if those laws prove to be unjust. He draws on his own experiences and explains why he refused to pay taxes in protest of slavery and the Mexican War. Thoreau this becomes a model for civil disobedience.

For years, the United States government chooses to ignore Thoreau's failure to pay taxes. Then he's arrested and thrown in jail, where he refuses to pay his back taxes. Someone pays the taxes for Thoreau, who is set free the next morning. Supposedly, the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson visited him in jail and asked why he was there. Thoreau then argues that there are two laws: the laws of men, and the higher laws of God and humanity. If the laws of men are unjust, then one has every right to disobey them.

2.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henry David Thoreau (see name pronunciation; July 12, 1817 – May 6, 1862) was an American essayist, poet, and philosopher. A leading transcendentalist, Thoreau is best known for his book Walden, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, and his essay "Civil Disobedience" (originally published as "Resistance to Civil Government"), an argument for disobedience to an unjust state.

Thoreau's books, articles, essays, journals, and poetry amount to more than 20 volumes. Among his lasting contributions are his writings on natural history and philosophy, in which he anticipated the methods and findings of ecology and environmental history, two sources of modern-day environmentalism. His literary style interweaves close observation of nature, personal experience, pointed rhetoric, symbolic meanings, and historical lore, while displaying a poetic sensibility, philosophical austerity, and Yankee attention to practical detail. He was also deeply interested in the idea of survival in the face of hostile elements, historical change, and natural decay; at the same time he advocated abandoning waste and illusion in order to discover life's true essential needs.

He was a lifelong abolitionist, delivering lectures that attacked the Fugitive Slave Law while praising the writings of Wendell Phillips and defending the abolitionist John Brown. Thoreau's philosophy of civil disobedience later influenced the political thoughts and actions of such notable figures as Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King.

Thoreau is sometimes referred to as an anarchist. Though "Civil Disobedience" seems to call for improving rather than abolishing government "I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government "the direction of this improvement contrarily points toward anarchism: ""That government is best

which governs not at all;' and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have."

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2.3 CRITICAL APPRECIATION

Having spent one night in jail in July of 1846 for refusal to pay his poll tax in protest against slavery and the Mexican War, Thoreau lectured before the Concord Lyceum in January of 1848 on the subject "On the Relation of the Individual to the State." The lecture was published under the title "Resistance to Civil Government" in Elizabeth Peabody's Aesthetic Papers, in May 1849. It was included (as "Civil Disobedience") in Thoreau's A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers, published in Boston in 1866 by Ticknor and Fields, and reprinted many times. The essay formed part of Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers as edited by British Thoreau biographer Henry S. Salt and issued in London in 1890. "Civil Disobedience" was included in the Riverside Edition of 1894 (in Miscellanies, the tenth volume), in the Walden and Manuscript Editions of 1906 (in Cape Cod and Miscellanies, the fourth volume), and in the Princeton Edition (in Reform Papers, the third volume) in 1973. One of Thoreau's most influential writings, it has been published separately many times (Walter Harding's The Variorum Civil Disobedience, for example, appeared in 1967), included in volumes of selections from Thoreau (among them the 1937 Modern Library Edition of Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau, edited by Brooks Atkinson), and translated into European and Asian languages.

Thoreau opens Civil Disobedience with the maxim "That government is best which governs least," and he speaks in favor of government that does not intrude upon men's lives. Government is only an expedient a means of attaining an end. It exists because the people have chosen it to execute their will, but it is susceptible to misuse. The Mexican War is an example of a few people using the government as their tool. Thoreau asserts that government as an institution hinders the accomplishment of the work for which it was created. It exists for the sole purpose of ensuring individual freedom. Denying an interest in abolishing government, he states that he simply wants a better government. Majority rule is based on physical strength, not right and justice. Individual conscience should rule instead, and civil government should confine itself to those matters suited to decision by majority rule. He deplores the lack of judgment, moral sense, and conscience in the way men serve the state. A man cannot bow unquestioningly to the state's authority without disregarding himself.

Thoreau introduces the right of revolution, which all men recognize, and reflects on the American Revolution, the origins of which he finds less morally compelling than the issues at hand. Having developed the image of the government as a machine that may or may not do enough good to counterbalance what evil it commits, he urges rebellion. The opponents of reform, he recognizes, are not faraway politicians but ordinary people who cooperate with the system. The

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expression of opposition to slavery is meaningless. Only action what you do about your objection matters. Wrong will be redressed only by the individual, not through the mechanism of government. Although Thoreau asserts that a man has other, higher duties than eradicating institutional wrong, he must at least not be guilty through compliance. The individual must not support the structure of government, must act with principle, must break the law if necessary.

Abolition can be achieved by withdrawing support from the government, which may be accomplished practically through the nonpayment of taxes. If imprisonment is the result, there is no shame in it prison is the best place for a just man in an unjust society. In the current state of affairs, payment of taxes is violent and bloody. Nonpayment constitutes a "peaceable revolution." Thoreau comments on the corrupting influence of money and property, and urges a simple, self-reliant lifestyle as a means of maintaining individual freedom.

He describes his experience in the Concord Jail in some detail, commenting upon the folly of the state's treatment of a man as if he were a physical entity only, rather than an intellectual and moral one. A man can be compelled only by one who possesses greater morality. In Civil Disobediences throughout his other writings, Thoreau focuses on the individual's ultimate responsibility to live deliberately and to extract meaning from his own life; overseeing the machinery of society is secondary.

Thoreau asserts that he does not want to quarrel or to feel superior to others. He wants to conform to the laws of the land, but current laws are not honorable from a higher point of view. Politics and politicians act as though the universe were ruled by expediency. In the progression from absolute monarchy to limited monarchy to democracy, Thoreau observes an evolution in government toward greater expression of the consent of the governed. He notes that democracy may not be the final stage in the process. His emphasis at the end of the essay is firmly on respect for the individual. There will never be a "really free and enlightened State" until the state recognizes the preeminence of the individual.

Check Your Progress

1. What is civil disobedience according to Thoreau?
2. What are the main ideas of civil disobedience?
3. What are 3 examples of civil disobedience?
4. Why does Thoreau look down on soldiers, captains, generals, etc?
5. Describe Thoreau's feelings in jail. Is he angry about being there? Happy? Sad?
6. Describe the metaphor Thoreau uses at the very end—what is his final message?
7. Where is the true place for a just man? Why?
8. What is the key to having a government that men want and respect?

2.4 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

NOTES

1. Thoreau's Civil Disobedience espouses the need to prioritize one's conscience over the dictates of laws. It criticizes American social institutions and policies, most prominently slavery and the Mexican-American War. ... This includes not being a member of an unjust institution (like the government).
2. Citizen's Duty. Thoreau argues that each individual is responsible for creating the society they want to live in.

   Law Versus Conscience. When law and conscience conflict, Thoreau believes no one should question which to choose.

   State Abuse of Power.

   The Ideal Government.
3. Staged sit-ins, marches, blockades, and hunger strikes have all be tactics used to raise awareness about issues that are taking place in society. Non-violent demonstrations such as these are known as civil disobedience.
4. They have an "undue respect for law;" they follow even if they don't believe in what the law is or if it goes against common sense.
5. He doesn't feel confined and sees the positive attributes of prison; he feels there is a better use of his time; he pities the state that thinks prison is a threat to conscience men and that putting them in prison will stop them
6. A man is compared to a plant; to use his mind and conscience is man's true nature, so not doing so will cause his death
7. Prison; this is a form of peaceful revolution (a minority is powerless when it conforms—he is not conforming and sending a peaceful by rebellious message)
8. They must think of what they want; they must be introspective

2.5 SUMMARY

Thoreau opens his essay with the motto "That government is best which governs least." His distrust of government stems from the tendency of the latter to be "perverted and abused" before the people can actually express their will through it. A case in point is the Mexican war (which would extend slavery into new US territories), orchestrated by a small élite of individuals who have manipulated government to their advantage against popular will.

Government inherently lends itself to oppressive and corrupt uses since it enables a few men to impose their will on the majority and to profit economically from their own position of authority. Democracy is a tradition, and with each

succeeding generation, it drifts from its original ideals of freedom and becomes increasingly burdensome and compromised. Thoreau views government as a fundamental hindrance to the people that it purports to represent. Far from furthering any creative enterprise, it has only stifled human accomplishment. Thoreau cites as a prime example the regulation of trade and commerce, and its negative effect on the forces of the free market.

Thoreau objects to the notion of majority rule on which democracy is theoretically founded, noting that the views of the majority do not always coincide with the morally right one. A man has an obligation to act according to the dictates of his conscience, even if the latter goes against majority opinion, the presiding leadership, or the laws of the society. Thoreau evokes the figure of soldiers marching to their deaths in the cause of a conflict that they perceive as unjust, and asks if they retain their humanity by deferring their fate to legislators.

Once a man resigns himself to the decisions of others, he becomes a machine, his body an instrument. Many men consider service to their country to be an automatic virtue, but any act of service must always be conjoined with the exercise of conscience. In cases where the government supports unjust or immoral laws, Thoreau's notion of service to one's country paradoxically takes the form of resistance against it. Resistance is the highest form of patriotism because it demonstrates a desire not to subvert government but to build a better one in the long term. Along these lines, Thoreau does not advocate a wholesale rejection of government, but resistance to those specific features deemed to be unjust or immoral. Later in the essay, he will qualify his position by refusing to pay a poll tax (used to fund the Mexican war), but readily pays taxes for education and road maintenance.

The opening paragraph expresses Thoreau's seemingly libertarian political sentiments the idea that the most ideal form of government is one which exercises the least power and control over its citizens. Thoreau pushes this line of thinking to its logical limit by envisioning a society in which government is eliminated altogether because men have the capacity to be self-regulating and independent. The implied dissolution of the State is as much an expression of Thoreau's idealism utopic vision that cannot be realistically achieved as it is the theoretical endpoint of the way societies develop and evolve.

There is an inherent tension between Thoreau's desire to limit the power of the State and the guarantee of freedom and equality that the State should provide to all of its citizens in the context of abolishing slavery. Whereas this theoretical tension remains largely unresolved in the essay, it is important to keep in mind from a purely historical standpoint that Thoreau is writing Civil Disobedience some twenty years before passage of the Fourteenth Amendment (guaranteeing equal protection and due process under the law), which substantially increased the role of the federal government in enforcing constitutional rights and freedoms. Ultimately, Thoreau's position cannot be accurately characterized as anti-government, since he is indeed willing to support some forms of social welfare with his tax dollars.

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His resistance to civil government springs not from some anarchic impulse or ideologically motivated hatred of the State, but from a more pragmatic understanding of how tax dollars enable the continuation of oppressive government policies.

Thoreau's frequent italicizing of pronouns underscores, on the level of language, some of the main themes in Civil Disobedience, notably that of agency. Referring to government, Thoreau writes in the second paragraph: "It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate." The colloquial use of pronouns in this way conflates the distinction central to Thoreau's thought between the individual and the State. A common tendency is to attribute the positive virtues and actions of individuals to an impersonal collectivity known as the State. To use "it" as the subject of the sentence confers an agency to the government that it does not intrinsically have. For Thoreau, government is an inanimate entity that draws its vitality and authority only from the people it represents.

Resistance to Civil Government

In the American tradition, men have a recognized and cherished right of revolution. Still, Thoreau has a dismissive attitude toward some of the grievances that have sparked revolts in the past, such as the 1775 protest against tax on foreign goods. From his perspective, slavery outweighs all other causes for revolution both in magnitude and moral gravity. As he points out, one sixth of the population in the United States lives in servitude. A man disgraces himself by associating with a government that treats even some of its citizens unjustly, even if he is not the direct victim of its injustice. Thoreau takes issue with William Paley, an English theologian and philosopher, who argues that any movement of resistance to government must balance the enormity of the grievance to be redressed and the "probability and expense" of redressing it.

Thoreau proceeds to attack those in his native state of Massachusetts who profess to be against slavery in the South while participating in the commerce and agricultural trade that supports it. The only effective and sincere way to express opposition is through concrete deeds and acts of resistance. Anti-slavery sentiment by itself does not exempt someone from the charge of moral complicity. Thoreau turns to the issue of effecting change through democratic means. Voting for politicians opposed to slavery does not in itself qualify as a moral commitment to the abolition of an unjust practice; it simply registers the will of the people that one policy should prevail over another. The position of the majority, however legitimate in democratic terms, is not tantamount to a moral position. The country is full of men who defer to majority opinion and the shortcomings of a political process that offers a limited number of candidates and choices.

Thoreau believes that the real obstacle to reform lies with those who disapprove of the measures of government while tacitly lending it their practical allegiance. At the very least, if an unjust government is not to be directly resisted, a man of true conviction should cease to lend it his indirect support in the form of taxes. Thoreau exhorts his reader to "action from principle" but again weighs the

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proportionality of the "remedy" (the measures of civil disobedience taken in the name of resistance) to the "evil" (the injustice to be remedied).

He concludes that if a specific law of a government makes a man into an "agent of injustice," that law should be rightfully transgressed and broken regardless of the individual repercussions. Thoreau calls on his fellow citizens to withdraw their support from the government of Massachusetts and risk being thrown in prison for their resistance. Forced to keep all men in prison or abolish slavery, the State would quickly exhaust its resources and choose the latter course of action. In these circumstances, to pay taxes would be to enable the continuation of a government's repressive policies. For Thoreau, out of these acts of conscience flow "a man's real manhood and immortality."

Money is a generally corrupting force because it binds men to the institutions and government responsible for unjust practices and policies, notably the enslavement of black Americans and the pursuit of the war with Mexico. Thoreau sees a paradoxically inverse relationship between money and freedom. The poor man has the greatest liberty to resist because he depends the least on the government for his own welfare and protection. For the "rich man," crudely speaking, the consequences of disobedience often seem too great, either to his property or personal standing in society. Thoreau explains how he has consequently dissociated himself from as many superfluous entanglements in outside institutions as possible, such as the local church.

Thoreau faces the difficult philosophical task of circumscribing the legitimate uses of civil disobedience even as he attempts to lay down a rationale for it. While the essay focuses specifically on slavery in the United States, the logic behind civil disobedience could be applied more generally to any number of grievances against government. At the risk of allowing his own argument to be invoked indiscriminately, Thoreau seeks to define in which cases it is justified to resist government, and in which cases the injustice is "part of the necessary friction of the machine of government."

Most importantly, Thoreau rejects the criterion of expediency used by Paley to judge the necessity of rebellion at a given moment in history. Though it may not be convenient to resist, and the personal costs greater than the injustice to be remedied, Thoreau firmly asserts the primacy of individual conscience over collective pragmatism. Civil disobedience does, however, involve at least two restrictions: 1) the means of resistance advocated and practiced by Thoreau are nonviolent (though in later political writings, he appears to change his mind on this matter) 2) the act of resistance should specifically target the injustice to be remedied. Moral objection to a particular law does not authorize nonobservance of all laws.

Some aspects of Thoreau's argument seem anti-democratic on their face, particularly his disregard for majority opinion as expressed through elected representatives. But Thoreau reveals himself to be far more nuanced over the course of the essay. His fundamental respect for democracy and the Constitution

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coexists with a pervasive cynicism about the integrity of politicians and the voting process, which significantly limits the ability of ordinary citizens to express their will in the first place.

At several points, Thoreau uses mechanical metaphors to describe the functioning of government.

To conceive of the State as a machine suggests its dehumanizing effects, especially with regard to the treatment of slaves. These metaphors are also part of a larger dichotomy in Thoreau's thinking between nature and artificial social constructs, such as government, corporations or the church. In the following section, Thoreau refers to a "higher law" derived from nature, and uses a metaphor borrowed from the natural world to justify civil disobedience.

A Night in Prison

After refusing to pay the poll tax for six years, Thoreau is thrown into jail for one night. His contemplation of the prison walls leads him to reflect on the split between mind and body. Whereas the State considers physical confinement a form of punishment and assumes that the chief desire of the inmate is to "stand on the other side of that stone wall," Thoreau realizes that the punishment is woefully inadequate and useless in his case, since his thoughts are more threatening to the State than any possible action he could undertake outside of prison. The only advantage of the State is "superior physical strength." Otherwise, it is completely devoid of moral or intellectual authority, and even with its brute force, cannot compel him to think a certain way. Thoreau compares the individual conscience and the State to an acorn and a chestnut that "obey their own laws," and must "live according to its nature" or perish. He proceeds to insert a detailed account of his incarceration:

Thoreau is fascinated with his prison roommate, a man claiming to be wrongly accused of arson. He reads the various tracts and verses left by previous occupants of the cell. That night, looking out from his cell window, Thoreau feels that as though he has traveled to "a far country." Confinement gives Thoreau a strangely novel and intimate view of his hometown and its institutions. He overhears fragments of conversation in the neighboring tavern and listens to the ringing of town-clock bells, which evoke in him the image of a medieval town. But Thoreau also feels a sense of alienation upon his release from prison. The townspeople, once familiar, now seem foreign to him; neighbors seem to greet him with bewilderment.

Thoreau reiterates the logic behind his refusal to pay the poll tax: while willing to support other activities of government, such as the building of roads and schools, he is unwilling to "abet the injustice to a greater extent than the State requires." Thoreau realistically recognizes that it is impossible to deprive the government of tax dollars for the specific policies that one wishes to oppose. Still, complete payment of his taxes would be tantamount to expressing complete allegiance to the State.

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Used throughout the essay, the first-person narration lends an especially striking note of authenticity and personal conviction to Thoreau's account of prison. Presumably written earlier as a diary entry, this passage seems to document Thoreau's observations in the moment, and to capture the spontaneity of his imagination and feelings in contrast to the more logical, philosophical mode of writing practiced elsewhere in Civil Disobedience. Instead of presenting another carefully reasoned moral argument that the reader is free to accept or dismiss, Thoreau has chosen here to describe his own experience, whose validity cannot be called into question. As a rhetorical gesture, this passage serves to inoculate Thoreau against the accusation of self-righteousness or moral grandstanding, which he refutes in subsequent paragraphs. It attests to the fact that he has already put his words into action.

In general, first-person narration allows Thoreau to frame a complex and abstract political issue in a voice that personally bears witness to the human effects and consequences of government oppression. It also exposes the reader to Thoreau's own ambivalence and to the ongoing process of self-examination that he encourages his fellow men to undertake in their own conscience. While confident in his conviction that slavery is morally wrong, Thoreau generally avoids dogmatic, authoritative statements in favor of a more tentative, moderate first-person voice. He prefers cautious formulations such as "This, then, is my position at present" over more militant, definitive ones that might alienate or put his reader on the defensive.

In contrast to his repeated comparison of the State to a machine, Thoreau personifies the State "as a lone woman with her silver spoons." He casts government not as a mechanical agent of injustice but as a feminized object of pity. Thoreau's confrontation with the State proves to him that physical violence is less powerful than individual conscience. Bodies can be contained behind walls, but ideas cannot. During his stay in prison, Thoreau comes to the realization that, far from being a formidable brute force, government is in fact weak and morally pathetic. That he should choose the figure of a woman to make this point reveals an interestingly gendered conception of civil disobedience, given the constant emphasis on the virtues of men in relation to the State, here personified as a woman.

Politicians and the People

Why submit other people to one's own moral standard? Thoreau meditates at length on this question. While seeing his neighbors as essentially well-intentioned and in some respects undeserving of any moral contempt for their apparent indifference to the State's injustice, Thoreau nonetheless concludes that he has a human relation to his neighbors, and through them, millions of other men. An appeal to their consciences is not altogether futile because these millions of other men are capable of reckoning with themselves and their God over questions of moral importance. Thoreau does not expect his neighbors to conform to his own beliefs,

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nor does he endeavor to change the nature of men. On the other hand, he refuses to tolerate the status quo.

His objective, moreover, is not to argue or to claim the high moral ground. Despite his stance of civil disobedience on the issues of slavery and the Mexican war, Thoreau claims to have great respect and admiration for the ideals of American government and its institutions. He is not a contrarian for its own sake or unwilling to obey most laws. Thoreau goes further to say that his first instinct has always been conformity. He is not by nature inclined to resist government, which in reality intrudes minimally into his daily thoughts and affairs.

Statesmen, legislators, politicians in short, any part of the machinery of state bureaucracy are unable to scrutinize the government that lends them their authority. To speak from within the institution of government is inherently a position of blindness. Thoreau values what these men contribute to society, their pragmatism and their diplomacy, but feels that only someone outside of government can speak the Truth about it. Even the lawyer, with his attentiveness to the concept of justice, is ultimately taught to think exclusively within the limits of a legal framework and hence to respect the Constitution that endorses slavery. Considerations of moral conscience do not come into play and sometimes are intentionally excluded when a problem is viewed in political or legal terms. Thoreau cites the speech of Daniel Webster, a prominent senator from Massachusetts at the time, who discounts the relevance of moral concerns to the issue of slavery. Webster concludes: "associations formed elsewhere, springing from a feeling of humanity Š have nothing whatever to do with it."

The purest sources of truth are, in Thoreau's view, the Constitution and the Bible. But politicians have never availed themselves of the lessons to be learned from these sacred documents. Confronted with "the much-vexed questions of the day," they have proven themselves incompetent and incapable of writing the most basic laws. "No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America" Thoreau proclaims with dry understatement. Without the corrective guidance of the people, America would have long ago declined in rank among the nations.

In his last paragraph, Thoreau comes full circle to discussing the authority and reach of government, which derives from the "sanction and consent of the governed." He reasserts the supremacy of the individual in relation to the State, and further insists that democracy is not the last step in the evolution of government, as there is still greater room for the State to recognize the freedom and rights of the individual. Thoreau concludes on a utopic note, saying such a State is one he has imagined "but not yet anywhere seen."

At first glance, Thoreau's citation of the New Testament as a source of truth is surprising and unexpected. Until this point, Thoreau has taken a largely secular view of government and even advocated breaking away from any institutionalized form of organized religion. Upon closer examination, it is apparent that Thoreau derives his justification of resistance not only from the historical tradition of revolution

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in America, but from religious sources as well. Throughout Civil Disobedience, passages from the Bible are referenced and seamlessly integrated into his argument about political dissent and civil disobedience. Thoreau cites Corinthians to emphasize the importance of individual conscience. Later, he quotes from Matthew to underscore his point about government and the corrupting effects of wealth.

Thoreau's allusions to the Bible are imbued with strong romantic and naturalist imagery. The source of truth is a "stream" that "comes trickling into this lake or that pool" from which wise men "drink." Such imagery points to Thoreau's transcendentalist belief that God is ultimately found within nature. In the final paragraph, Thoreau turns to another organic metaphor: as soon as an individual has been cultivated and "ripened" to the point of maturity, the State should allow him to "drop off" the tree, and to live free and independently. In the same paragraph, Thoreau counterbalances this idealistic vision with a more historical overview of government, commenting on the changing relationship in modern times between people and those who rule and legislate. The momentum of that change has favored greater individualism and autonomy: "The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual." Thoreau's concept of civil disobedience fits into the larger historical narrative of "progress" by empowering the individual to achieve greater freedom and equality for him and others.

2.6 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Thoreau believes that people should not participate in injustice but that they do not have to actively promote a more just world. What is the difference between these two concepts, and why does Thoreau make this moral distinction?

   Thoreau sees a moral distinction between failing to prevent an injustice and actually causing an injustice. Consider an example. Thoreau argues that the United States' invasion of Mexico is immoral and that Americans who support the government with their person (as soldiers) or property (through taxes) are complicit in that injustice. He would further say that a person should go to jail rather than be responsible for that invasion. However, imagine a case in which another country was invading Mexico, but that by offering himself up as some sort of hostage and allowing himself to be imprisoned, he could stop that invasion. Thoreau would argue that while it would be perfectly moral to go to jail in this case, he would not be required to do so. As a human being, he may legitimately have other ends or goals that require him to be out of jail. It is not his job to promote the best world possible by any means necessary. All that can be asked of a person is that he not dirties his own hands with injustice. Once this requirement is fulfilled, each individual

should decide for himself what to do with his life. This distinction is rooted in Thoreau's belief that individuals should look inward for how they should live their lives. A person's primary duty is to be true to himself—to act with integrity and to pursue personal moral goals.

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2. Is Thoreau's conception of civil disobedience compatible with democratic government? Why or why not?

   Civil disobedience is somewhat at odds with democratic government, but it can be argued that it is not fully incompatible with it. The tension with democracy is fairly obvious: democracy only works when a community is able to pass laws with the understanding that all will abide by what the majority desires. Thoreau completely rejects the idea that a person should ever compromise or tolerate a policy he or she did not want. While this is feasible in the case of a few individuals, if Thoreau's approach is generalized, then society would fall apart. However, there is still some sense in which civil disobedience is compatible with democracy. First, Thoreau is not advocating that people simply deny the existence of unjust laws. Thoreau says that protesters will likely have to pay for the consequences for their actions.

   This will force society to decide whether it is willing to have all of its just citizens in jail. And, if it is willing to allow this, then jail is the only place for good persons to be. Thoreau, then, does not recognize the moral authority of unjust laws (and he, therefore, encourages people to violate them), but he does accept their legal authority (and he, thus, accepts that he may be put in jail). Secondly, while Thoreau's principle is dangerous if universalized, it is much more benign if people are violating only unjust laws. For unjust laws are usually themselves undemocratic. Unjust laws disenfranchise people or don't recognize due process or place unfair burdens on certain segments of the population. It is a paradox of democracy that democratic institutions can produce laws that violate democratic principles. It remains debatable whether this paradox undermines the democratic process as a whole.

3. What is Thoreau's opinion on wealth and consumption? Why does he say that the rich are less likely to practice civil disobedience?

   Thoreau is highly critical of materialism and consumption. He argues that when people have a lot of wealth they begin to concentrate on how to spend their money, instead of on how they should live their lives. Secondly, rich people, because they have much more than most people, also have much more to lose by practicing civil disobedience. Furthermore, in order to be able to make money, a person must play along with the existing institutions. It is, therefore, much harder for the wealthy consumer to take a critical stance about the government. Thoreau's stern stance on wealth reflects some of his own values, most clearly seen in his exercise in "simple living" on Walden Pond. Thoreau was a supporter of a simple life lived close to

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nature and clearly thought that this lifestyle was most conducive to individualism and self-reliance. Thus, in his essay, Thoreau condemns a wealthy lifestyle because he believes it incompatible with civil disobedience but also because it goes against his own more general personal values.

One Word Questions

1. **What is the main theme of 'Civil Disobedience'?**

   Moral responsibility

2. **When does Thoreau say a citizen should disobey?**

   When the government is being immoral

3. **Why was Thoreau put in jail?**

   He refused to pay a tax

4. **What role does Thoreau challenge in 'Civil Disobedience'?**

   The government

5. **What kind of government does Thoreau describe in 'Civil Disobedience'?**

   A democracy

6. **How does Thoreau say a citizen should disobey?**

   Withdraw support

7. **What does Thoreau say the best government will NOT do in 'Civil Disobedience'?**

   Govern

2.7 FURTHER READINGS

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UNIT 3 THE ART OF FICTION - HENRY JAMES

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Structure

3.0 INTRODUCTION

Henry James is known not only as a novelist but also for his work as literary critic. In his famous essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884), he reacted on a pamphlet that the British author Walter Besant had published under the same title earlier that year. In fact, a discussion and controversy on the novel had already been started in 1882 with Howells' "Henry James Jr." and Stevenson's "A Gossip of Romance". James used the opportunity to present his ideas on the novel of fiction: "A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life". It is very important for him to stress that life is personally -and therefore subjectively- received by an author who then tries to represent life in his work. James offers in his essay various new aspects that a novelist should be aware of and make use of if he wants to write a realistic and true novel. In the "The Art of Fiction," Henry James holds the view that fiction is an art that cannot be governed by a set of rules. According to the author, fiction is a genre that should not be confined by a set of guidelines since they will make it less of an art.

Moreover, James argues that fiction cannot be limited by morals since it prevents the artist from exploring his or her creativity. A work of art is an expression of an artist's feelings, which should not be restricted by morality. James closes the essay by encouraging writers to stay true to themselves and their vision and to worry less about following rules and more about creating art. He suggests they do what feels, looks, and sounds real rather than what feels, looks, or sounds right.

3.1 OBJECTIVES

"The Art of Fiction" is Henry James's attempt to rebuke the claims made in Sir Walter Besant's lecture "Fiction as One of the Fine Arts."

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Besant argued that fiction required both talent and the following of certain rules that govern the creation of an appropriate piece. It's the second point that James disagrees with, as he sets out to prove in his essay.

James begins with stating the three points he plans to make throughout the essay:

1. "Fiction is an Art in every way worthy to be called the sister and the equal of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Poetry" In other words, James plans to show that fiction, like all other arts, is limitless.
2. "That it is an Art which, like them, is governed and directed by general laws; and that these laws may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion." Here, James directly rebuts Besant's claim that rules are necessary, or even possible, to guide any form of art.
3. "Fiction is so far removed from the mere mechanical arts that no laws or rules whatever can teach it to those who have not already been endowed with the natural and necessary gifts."

James's final point is that natural talent is required to excel in writing fiction and that rules are fine to guide but cannot replace natural talent if it doesn't exist.

4. James goes on to explore this thesis by analyzing the stages of creating a work of fiction and how they fail or succeed depending on certain qualities in a writer. James agrees with Besant in general ways.

3.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henry James OM (15 April 1843 – 28 February 1916) was an American-British author regarded as a key transitional figure between literary realism and literary modernism, and is considered by many to be among the greatest novelists in the English language. He was the son of Henry James Sr. and the brother of renowned philosopher and psychologist William James and diarist Alice James. He is best known for a number of novels dealing with the social and marital interplay between emigre Americans, English people, and continental Europeans. Examples of such novels include **The Portrait of a Lady, The Ambassadors, and The Wings of the Dove**. His later works were increasingly experimental. In describing the internal states of mind and social dynamics of his characters, James often made use of a style in which ambiguous or contradictory motives and impressions were overlaid or juxtaposed in the discussion of a character's psyche. For their unique ambiguity, as well as for other aspects of their composition, his late works have been compared to impressionist painting. His novella The Turn of the Screw has garnered a reputation as the most analyzed and ambiguous ghost story in the English language and remains his most widely adapted work in other media. He also wrote a number

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of other highly regarded ghost stories and is considered one of the greatest masters of the field. James published articles and books of criticism, travel, biography, autobiography, and plays. Born in the United States, James largely relocated to Europe as a young man and eventually settled in England, becoming a British subject in 1915, one year before his death. James was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1911, 1912 and 1916.

3.3 CRITICAL APPRECIATION

Henry James was a pioneer in theory and criticism of the novel though he did not pen down any systematic writing in a book form on the art of fiction. To find out his theory on the art of life, fiction, poetry, criticism; we have to analyze his essays, reviews, notebooks, prefaces, letters etc. But before retailing James' theory; it would be interesting to dwell upon other's opinion on the art of fiction. Crawford felt fiction as a ' pocket theater' whereas Henry Fielding had a notion that fiction is a ' comic epic in prose'. For Meredith, it was a summary of actual life including both the within and without of us' and for Nash, it was nothing more than 'stories of action'. But for Henry James, Virginia Woolf and Charles Morgan, it was something deeper. They felt that the fiction must have the tendency 'to subordinate action to psychology' and the central theme should be in the mental and spiritual developments of the character rather than in their physical adventures. James also refutes the remark of George Moore about the novel as' a drawing room entertainment addressed chiefly to ladies'. For James a broad definition of novel can be ' a personal direct impression of life, value depending upon the intensity of impressions and it must have freedom to feel and say.'

In the beginning, English novel was not disputable. It had no theory, no conviction, and no consciousness. James was the first to codify a theory of fiction and he was the first to catch 'the atmosphere of the mind' in his novels. James was primarily an analytical writer, not content with the face value of human behavior and the result was his withdrawal from appearance and the superficial forms of life. For James, the novelist is a particular window open to the world simultaneously intensely consult and the same time intensely ignore life.

His own inspiration derived from his own experiences which for him were impressions but he nourished the impressions or the germ by his 'essence'. He keeps only the essential essence and the rest is estranged which resulted in decreasing number of events and of course no series of events. When he discussed relations between people and people and people and events, he discussed them in particular situations rather than in general. His subjects have plastic and moral contents.

The development of his novels was primarily psychological and the value of his work lied in the framework and in the story. His subjects live more in inner thoughts and tensions rather than in the real world. Their motivations, feelings,

impulses are better known than their acts. He felt that the only reason for the existence of a novel is to represent life and this is the reason why he admired the contemporary French writers even if he disliked them on account of immorality. He valued realism so much that he could not exchange Madam Bovary of Flaubert for George Eliot's novel whose morality he admired. James was amazingly a prolific writer. He wrote everything except poetry.

He failed as a dramatist; however, he learnt from it the mastery over fundamental statement. James was a journalist, a foreign correspondent, a serious critic and a playwright. He altogether wrote eighteen prefaces for his novels which turn his critical mind upon himself- form, theory, art in general. His letters too are warm and fresh and contain vital views regarding the art of fiction.

He believed novel as the most elastic of all the art form. He was the first intensely moralistic novel critic. He saw literature as a human and moral concern. James believed his prefaces as a manual of novel writing, though they are much disorganized. The central obsession of his preface is 'form' and he feels that without it, they are like fluid puddings as the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. James also believed in the superiority of art over life. He complained that English novel had no air of having a theory even the French had it though it was a new idea relatively for them too. Since fiction is one of the forms of art, Henry James' poetics on art helps us to understand his art of fiction. His writings are interpersonal with various views, statements, definitions of art and the art of fiction.

James did not believe in 'art for art sake' nor did he believe in ' art for life sake'. He had decided moral leanings towards morality but it was never at the cost of art. Flaubert has a major default of intelligence in' Madame Bovary' because here it is an addiction to art that is set over against life. The sense of life is a serious matter in creative literature. Even Balzac in 'La Comedie' is extremely populous though it misses the sense of life. Henry James says that 'the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.' He also believes that ' a good novel is not at all a deliberate moralizing pill and with a happy ending, but it is the execution of good impulses in the minds of readers and other human beings whereas bad novels sweep into unvisited limbo.

A good novel always stimulates the desire for perfection. Mr. Besant says that a novelist must write from his own experience, his characters must be real as met in actual life. However, reality has 'a myriad forms' – literal, physical, external, psychological or emotional depending upon the imaginative power of a novelist 'to catch and present a particular kind of reality of life and the world and make it legitimate, cogent so as to hold and sustain our interest and attention.

The aim of reality is the supreme virtue of a novel. Henry James believes that 'experience' does not mean war, battle, upheaval, revolt, revolution, invasion or aggression. It is never ending and is all around. But it all depends on upon the imaginative sensibility and the fertility of the novelist's minds. If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience. In the same way,

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'adventure' or 'incident' does not necessarily mean some hair raising incident but it may be apparently a little happening.

He also feels that there cannot be a conventional distinction between the novel of character and a novel of incident. In fact, the novel is an organic whole- it has almost all the elements in a proportional degree; impressions, experience, narration, description, and reflection, story, and dialogues which must cooperate, reinforce, advance, multiply and intensify one another. To James the classification of novel can be one which has life and that which has not.

But even this is not the right classification because a novelist can make his novel ' have life' in many ways. For example, for Dickens, social phenomenon, social evils, and exploitations dominate the scene and infuse 'life' whereas, for D.H. Lawrence, life is in physical desires and urges; whereas for Henry James, life is a bit deeper, more inner or psychological. James also opposes Besant's ideas that a fiction should have a conscious moral purpose.

He says how novels being a picture can be moral or immoral. He says it has not a purpose but diffidence. He has a fascination for the rich subject but he also says that an artist has not to rule out or reject the unpleasant, ugly and the disagreeable experiences. For novelists like Henry Fielding, Thackeray, Dickens and the like; the external, the social, the outward were exciting but it is psychological which is the most exciting for James. However, he does not lag behind in fully appreciating the novel or novelists of another kind. In his essay, The Future of Novel 'Henry James opines that the novel is all pictures, the most comprehensive and the most elastic. It will stretch anywhere and it could include anything, subject being the whole human consciousness. James believes in the fullest freedom of mankind and the liberty of mind and desires a novel not be tethered to rules and restrictions. To deduce James's fictional views and principles, we must analyze his views on a few other novels and novelists. Henry James rejects the novel `Our Mutual Friend' because this is devoid of life and a central inspiration to unify the various events.

He says there is no trace of ' nature' in Wordsworth's sense or reality. James wishes philosophical bent of mind in a novelist so that he may see an ideal concept of 'man'. James rejects 'The Belton Estate' on the ground that its realism is photographic and there is no central consciousness. For' Middle March' he opines that it has no systematic design and is an indifferent whole.

However, the novel has some merits also like it has a combination of instinct and thought, fact and fiction. James rejects ' Far from the Madding Crowd' because of its diffuseness and padding. James is vexed with its defects and expects rules for all time for neatness, tightness and lesser length to rule out padding. For 'Nana' he says it has naturalism but it is devoid of morality. He also comments that never was any other writer as dirty as Zola. While discussing novelists like Maupassant, he feels that Maupassant's views towards life are dark and negative.

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James says that there must be hopefulness as life is not a series of despair. By this alone human life is to be sustained, maintained or consoled. James is disturbed by the themes of sex, nakedness, and prostitution in Maupassant's writings. However, he pacifies his feelings for him by saying it all feeling, all experience and impression and Maupassant himself feels that any novelist sees the world from his own point of view. Flaubert for him was novelist's novelist, who bothered much for perfection and style but he was also devoid of human life or vital human experience inadequate degree. In the same way, he does not appreciate Balzac because of his numerous details of numerous things, which gives no room to inner consciousness. James feels that Balzac is obsessed of the material, the financial, the social and the technical which becomes antidotal to something divine, spiritual, idealistic and the sacramental. He advises Emile Zola that a novel is like a big ship to give room to multifarious impressions and carry these to the desired destination without any jerk or upheaval. He has an assimilating and vivifying power. For James, D' Annunziolacked the moral sense.

However, in him, there is an ideal fusion of all necessary qualities like exciting sensibility, splendid visual sense, ample and exquisite style. James believes that life and literature should be mixed in such a way that it should be a very difficult to separate one from the other. Although James theorized that for a novelist there is all life and all experience to be presented yet he shows his aversion or reaction to finding the sexual passion dealt with a novel of D ' Annunzio. For Turgenev who is a storyteller, James feels that his tales are a magazine of small facts and he strikes at living details.

This is the secret of novelist's art. Before James, there was no full-fledged or satisfying theory of the novel. Drama and poetry were acceptable forms of literature. During the 18th century, the branch could not come into its real form. Ian watt in 1852 was trying to give the novel a separate entity. Henry James used the concept of 'the operative consciousness' which was not in full measure. The novelists were fond of 'telling' and author's intrusion in the novel was quite visible sometimes even with moral comments as we find in Walter Scott's ' The Secret of Midlothian'. Besides, there was no 'advance rhetoric of fiction'. Usually, the plainer, the rougher and the less sublime were used in prose. Novels in the 18th and the 19th century in England were tagged to fixed canons and conventions. To represent character and action, the emphasis was put on episodes, events, actions and the external matters.

Novels were also largely ideological as in Robinson Crusoe' of Defoe which had a providential pattern and social criticism of life within accepted codes of conduct. The illusion of reality could often be marred by the novelist's moral pill or the author's intrusion. Emily Bronte had the same habit. Surprisingly some English novelists who were also artists did not exercise their mind on theory. Richardson used an epistolary form which proved a good solution to the problem of presenting a point of view indirectly. Organic construction of the stories achieved plot character relationship in his novels. Jane Austen had a happy equilibrium in all general senses.

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She was the first writer of the pure novel. Her plots were on the contrasting feature, romanticism, and practicality. She satirized fancies, achieved dramatic objectivity and gave lively pictures of elegant society. She created sparkling dialogues and style with a classical perfection. Thackeray emphasized on linguistic subtlety than on character and action. The distinguished trait of the English novel had been realism. It had a social, moral or ideological basis. But the idea of devising a perfect medium to give the vision of reality and the maximum expression; seems alien to the English novel. If some achieved it as Richardson did, it was all accidental or if Jane Austen and Thackeray, it was all due to their inherent artistic sense. But none of them formulated a theory deliberately. The same thing was missing even in American novels. There was a concern for art in Nathaniel Hawthorne's ' The Scarlet Letters'. It missed economy of detail, punctuation, and observance of the principle of unity and novelists gaze on the human soul. In The Blithdale Romance, the action of the novel is viewed through one of his characters. He is interested in the impact of sin on human conscience.

Before William Dean Howells, there was the tradition of romance in American novels. Howells was the chief exponent of realism in American fiction. He believed that novelists should deal with human life in simple reality and not indulge in a romantic escape. In the later phase of his life, he was attracted to Tolstoy with his image of God and his presence in human life. Before Henry James, there was a romantic strain in American novels. Thus it is obvious that the English, as well as the American novels, had no viable theory on the art of the novel. They lacked form because there was apathy for the aesthetics of the novel. Henry James appeared timely on the literary scene.

Authenticity was an important concern for the novelists of the period and it was believed in personal first-hand intercourse with the world. George Eliot attacks women novelists of her day because they were trying to write like men without taking the fundamental difference of sex. But the knowledge of life may be obtained in various ways besides direct personal experience. It could be taken from books, conversation, people etc. James uses and utilizes all kinds of information. However, the first-hand experience keeps the story fresh and interesting. It was also believed that there should not be any gap or inconsistencies in a novel. It should be artistically told. Parts should be arranged with a due sense of balance and proportion. However, E. M. Forster does not appreciate this approach. He says that 'The Ambassadors' is a reward due to the fine artist for hard work. He attains it at the cost of a short list of characters and they are constructed on very stingy lines.

This is all in the interest of pattern. He believed in a single topic, situation, and gesture to occupy the characters and provide a plot. To E. M. Foster a rigid pattern is to shut the doors on life. James as a practitioner might have failed in some of his novels but 'The Portrait of a Lady' was both the beauty of symmetry and fullness of life. For this reason, the absence of vitality of life in Flaubert, though he has a beauty of symmetry, James does not give his full-fledged praise to him. James also feels that there should be a new vision in which imagination and reality

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should be mixed in a proper way. He also says that facts should be limited otherwise the novelists will become a recorder like Balzac who had an obsession with the actual. He also says that 'form' is important and any disregard for form leads to an abuse of dialogue. Henry James' Prefaces are more eloquent about form. Besides 'form', it is only through large lucid reflector 'the acute central consciousness' that the values of a story can be fully expressed and the unity of the subject manifested.

James has an innate leaning towards some 'dignified' subjects. A novelist like James can introduce dignity, nobility, and goodness even in an ignoble subject or theme like that in' What Maisie knew'. In this novel, the chief characters are stupid and ignoble but only Maisie's 'freshness', her innocent fluttering's, acute intelligence and wonder make it the stuff of poetry, tragedy, and art. For the first time, Henry James took seriously the writing of the novel as an art form. He emphasized on designing of materials or patterning of subject matter or coherence. He discarded redundancy. He had a lifelong passion for facts, for experience and impressions, human contacts and knowledge.

He felt that a novel must have life, an ideal vision, a moral leaning and a round finish. The central consciousness in a novel as theorized by James is like the center, and other smaller characters revolve around him. For James life may be chaotic, inexhaustible, a splendid waste but art gives it beauty and meaning through form and expression. James has a fascination for a great morally dignified character. Only great subjects with moral problems interest him. Recognition of error or acceptance of one's fault is the very nerve of Jamesian novels. He paid utmost attention to the moment of revelation. He says a novel must be logical, convincing and natural or lifelike. He also says that reality does not mean 'literal actuality'. He has a passion for good and great subject matter. Henry James had large and illuminating ideas about the theory of fiction in his prefaces. Statement of the anecdote and the circumstances, in which it was told, from where James drew the germ of the story – a single phrase, a single sentence, a short anecdote told or uttered by someone could lead to the creation of a novel. Henry James brought to bear certain emphases on the art of fiction throughout the preface- a presiding intelligence, the method of indirect approach, the necessity of being amusing, expressive relation between art and life and an international theme which deals with the opposition of manners and the use of innocent characters as the subjects of drama.

3.4 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

What do you mean by fiction?

A fiction is a deliberately fabricated account of something. It can also be a literary work based on imagination rather than on fact, like a novel or short story. The Latin word fictus means "to form," which seems like a good source for the English word fiction, since fiction is formed in the imagination.

What is the argument of James Henry in this essay?

James argues that fiction cannot be limited by morals since it prevents the artist from exploring his or her creativity. A work of art is an expression of an artist's feelings, which should not be restricted by morality.

How does Henry James analyze fiction?

James analyses, however briefly, the process of creation of a work of fiction, readers' responses to it, and the requirements of the work and the author. James' language within this essay may be in need of some levity, but he does occasionally break through the haze to make a very strong and effective point.

Why James did not believe in 'art for art sake'?

James did not believe in 'art for art sake' nor did he believe in ' art for life sake'. He had decided moral leanings towards morality but it was never at the cost of art. Flaubert has a major default of intelligence in' Madame Bovary' because here it is an addiction to art that is set over against life. The sense of life is a serious matter in creative literature.

Even Balzac in 'La Comedie' is extremely populous though it misses the sense of life. Henry James says that 'the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.' He also believes that ' a good novel is not at all a deliberate moralizing pill and with a happy ending, but it is the execution of good impulses in the minds of readers and other human beings whereas bad novels sweep into unvisited limbo. A good novel always stimulates the desire for perfection.

What is the idea of Mr. Besant idea on a novelist?

Mr. Besant says that a novelist must write from his own experience, his characters must be real as met in actual life. However, reality has 'a myriad forms' – literal, physical, external, psychological or emotional depending upon the imaginative power of a novelist 'to catch and present a particular kind of reality of life and the world and make it legitimate, cogent so as to hold and sustain our interest and attention. The aim of reality is the supreme virtue of a novel.

What is the view of Henry James on novelists like Maupassant?

While discussing novelists like Maupassant, he feels that Maupassant's views towards life are dark and negative. James says that there must be hopefulness as life is not a series of despair. By this alone human life is to be sustained, maintained or consoled. James is disturbed by the themes of sex, nakedness, and prostitution in Maupassant's writings. However, he pacifies his feelings for him by saying it all feeling, all experience and impression and Maupassant himself feels that any novelist sees the world from his own point of view.

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What is life according to Henry James?

For James life may be chaotic, inexhaustible, a splendid waste but art gives it beauty and meaning through form and expression. James has a fascination for a great morally dignified character. Only great subjects with moral problems interest him. Recognition of error or acceptance of one's fault is the very nerve of Jamesian novels. He paid utmost attention to the moment of revelation.

3.5 SUMMARY

The novel has struggled to be taken seriously as an art form. The very title of James's essay begins his campaign on its behalf: 'art' and 'fiction', often seen at odds with each other, are placed side by side here. Prose fiction includes short stories, novellas (longer short stories), and the novel. James regarded the novel as supreme in its importance, not least because of the possibilities it provided for larger-scale plot development and characterization. In this essay, as Mark Spilkahas argued, James began 'an adventure of immense importance to the novel's history' James begins by referring to 'the mystery of story-telling' and it is worth reminding ourselves that the word 'mystery' originally referred to the secrets of a particular trade, or craft, and that 'art' was generally applied in mediaeval times and beyond to practical skills. James's perspective in this essay is very much that of the producer, of the novelist, and he wants to retrieve this older, practical sense of' art', together with the meaning that developed in the Romantic period (in literature, from around the 1780s through to the 1830s). In that period, artists were regarded as creative geniuses involved in the production of beautiful artifacts. What defined art, increasingly in the nineteenth century, was its detachment from the world, or its apparent lack of a specifiable purpose.

The best fiction, for James, is an art because it involves both the kind of proficiency in a craft that comes with a long apprenticeship and the individual creative genius celebrated by Romantic writers such as the English poets William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and John Keats(1795– 1821). By combining these meanings of 'art', James attempts to fend off those who attack the novel for having 'no great character' and for being a' commodity so quickly and easily produced'.

At the core of James's definition of the novel is what he sees as its responsibility to represent life. He states that this is 'the only reason for the existence of a novel'(1884: 46). But it soon emerges that James is committed to a complex and shifting sense of what this responsibility amounts to. Part of the reason for these complications is James's belief that 'a novel ought to be artistic' as well as a representation of life. In an era of burgeoning popular photography, James wants to put as much distance as possible between the novel and crude realism. He argues that '[a] novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life' .Crucially important here is the imaginative power of the writer; and this is what distinguishes the good novel from the bad, or popular, novel.

To write artistic novels, rather than novels merely, the author must have '[t]he power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern' (1884: 53). A novel should seek not only to represent life, then, but to refract that representation through faculties of the imagination sharpened by sensitive and responsive observations in the world of experience. To say that novels represent experience realistically and leave it at that is to fail to acknowledge 'that experience is never limited', and that 'it is never complete' (1884: 52). It is also to overlook that 'the measure of reality is very difficult .James is less interested in 'reality', much more in the 'air of reality'.

The central appeal of the novel is in its ability to represent life so interestingly that it actually' competes' with it . Indeed, James was to go much further than this in a letter to the English novelist H. G. Wells ,arguing there that 'it is art that makes life' (1915: 770). At the very least – because of its scope, flexibility of form, and openness towards experimentation – the novel can have the 'large, free character of an immense and exquisite correspondence with life' .If the novel is a representation of life, its own vitality comes in part from the fusion of that representation with the writer's own impressions. James's insistence on the need for novels to be vital, on the analogy between the novel as a form and life, has a significant bearing on his theories of fiction and definition of the novel.

What matters here is the emphasis on the artificial nature of any boundaries between character and story, or plot, dialogue, description, and narration. James saw novels, in keeping with his description of them as 'the most human form of art' as 'organic' in form. This fear of writing in 'blocks' is partly what propels James into condemning novels where the author's voice, or that of his narrator, is obtrusive. James was unhappy with facile connections between text and author, and anxious about destructive interferences from the reader at large. Further at issue are what James regarded as fruitless distinctions, then common, between 'the novel of character and the novel of incident'.

James was often criticized for focusing too much on psychological analysis at the expense of telling a good story, for elaborating on character rather than concentrating on the plot; and his defense is that the boundaries between these are useless. Such separations result in a dead rather than a living work of art. He regarded characters as analogous to the seeds of a plant: the novel should develop outwardly from the nature of those characters, the plot resulting from their characteristics and not the other way round.

James extends his application of the biological metaphor of an organism when identifying the 'search for form' as a central feature of the art of fiction. The search, among other things, is for the most effective way of structuring and narrating the story as a whole; and it can only be found from within the subject itself, not by imposing existing patterns or applying sterile rules. In his preface to The Spoils of Poynton, James calls this 'the logic of the particular case' .This view leads not just to a rejection of any externally imposed purpose on the novel, in keeping with the

idea of organic form, but to the repudiation of any kind of 'conscious moral purpose'.

The alternative is to confine the subject to 'conventional, traditional moulds', thereby reducing it to 'an eternal repetition of a few familiar clichés' .It is a 'mistake' to 'say so definitely beforehand what sort of an affair the good novel will be'; the 'only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel is that it be interesting' (1884: 49). Centre of its chosen subject. 'we can estimate quality', James believed, only by applying the 'test of execution' by judging what an author has done with his or her subject. James criticized George Eliot's Middlemarch for example, for being a 'treasure-house of details', but an 'indifferent whole'. He saw the character of Dorothea as central to the novel and felt that excursions into other characters and stories were a distraction.

For James, George Eliot's novel not only dealt with its subject in too scattered and distracting a way, it was ultimately irresponsive and irresponsible to what should have been its subject, Dorothea, thereby failing the 'test of execution'. A similar idea is expressed in the preface to The Portrait of a Lady. The ' "moral "sense of a work of art' depends 'on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it': 'The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs'. 'Sense', especially the peculiarly intense sense of the highly intelligent novelist, connects the moral and the aesthetic for James. This is part of a long tradition of thinking that goes all the way back to the Greek philosopher Plato and beyond. One of its most well-known manifestations is in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': 'Beauty is Truth, – Truth Beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'.

Experience is at the core of the moral and the aesthetic. The moral and the artistic senses converge if we become 'one on whom nothing is lost' as we encounter complex, ambiguous experiences. We start to become moral, as James defines the word, only as we begin to realize that our perspective is partial and needs to take account of the perspectives of others. Art and morality are social affairs. Novelists and readers, like James's characters, need to develop their moral intelligence as they steep themselves in the complexity of experiencing the world. But for James 'experience is never limited and is never complete'. What matters is the extent to which 'The Art of Fiction' unites the experiencing subject with experience by suggesting that an 'immense sensibility' is the 'very atmosphere' of the 'mind' .Sensibility is always transitive; to be sensible, ultimately, is to be sensible of the world of experience. At this point, as a way of grasping just how inseparable art and morality are for James, you might ÀÛèÜnd it helpful to review the discussion of perspective and consciousness .

Quite simply, James believes that to become an intelligent novelist is to reach amoral stature beyond narrow, conventional, thinking. He further believes that this should be a general aspiration, while still holding to the view that intelligence is often the preserve of the few. In such a world, he observes wistfully, 'are we not

moreover – and let it pass this time as a happy hope! – pretty well all novelists now?' .

The novel, for both the writer and the reader, is the road not to moral principles, but to the moral sense; and where the novelist is intelligent, the novel will offer an experience that has the potential for shaping and developing the reader's own intelligence. The novel is 'the great extension, great beyond all others, of experience and of consciousness' and 'experience' is, for James, 'our appreciation and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures'. If the novel is intelligently controlled, all the necessary moral ground will be covered, and 'all prate of its representative character, its meaning and its bearing, its morality and humanity, [is] an impudent thing' .Novels should not transmit moral principles and rules as such, but renovate and develop the mind by attempting to engage the reader in the pursuit of intricate combinations of form, content, and germinating subjects.

James connects morality and realism in The Art of Fiction by arguing that novelists should not limit what they represent to the morally exemplary by excluding aspects of human experience: 'the essence of moral energy is to survey the whole field' Two things will guarantee the broader moral reach of the novel: the acuity of the novelist, and the degree to which his or her novels can stimulate critical investigation and reflection. James strikingly defined 'moral consciousness' as 'stirred intelligence' in his New York prefaces; and he believed that a sharp, responsive intellect and a sense of morality were much the same thing. The clarifying expression of some of these ideas came eight years before The Art of Fiction in an essay entitled The Minor French Novelists.

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3.6 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. **Choice of subject belongs to the artist without restriction.**

   We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his donnée; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it.

2. **Conscious artistry and treatment of the subject is the key.**

   Art is essentially selection.

   Questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution.

3. **Organic structure is important.**

   A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts. This idea dates back to Romantics such as Wordsworth and Coleridge in poetry, but James here asserts the principle on behalf of the novel.

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4. **Artistry, not morality, should be the criterion. “Bad” novels and “good” novels are a matter of taste, not morality or choice of subject matter.**

   Nothing, of course, will ever take the place of the good old fashion of “liking” a work or not liking it. This also encompasses the high culture/low culture issue we discussed the other day.

   There are bad novels and good novels, as there are bad pictures and good pictures; but that is the only distinction in which I can see any meaning.

5. **Faithfulness to life (realism) is the important factor.**

   The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life. The air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel

6. **The expertise of the writer, like that of the painter, depends upon an artistic sensibility and openness to impressions.**

   Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spiderweb of the finest silk threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness.

A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life.

   It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being.

   “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!”

7. **Critics must judge works by the standards the artists have established.**

   Moreover, it isn’t till I have accepted your data that I can begin to measure you. I have the standard, the pitch; I have no right to tamper with your flute and then criticize your music.

8. **Too many critics have drawn false distinctions, such as that between novels of action and novels of character. Novels representing reality ultimately address character.**

   The novel and the romance, the novel of incident and that of character—these clumsy separations appear to me to have been made by critics and readers for their own convenience.

9. **Although it was formerly held in disrepute, the novel is a true art form and expresses legitimate truths, as do painting and history**.

   The old superstition about fiction being “wicked” has certainly died out in England; but the spirit of it lingers in a certain oblique regard directed toward any story which does not more or less admit that it is only a joke.

It is not expected of the picture that it will make itself humble in order to be forgiven; and the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete.

History also is allowed to represent life . The subject-matter of fiction is stored up likewise in documents and records, and if it will not give itself away, as they say in California, it must speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian.

10. Accordingly, the author should take his obligation seriously and keep himself out of the text, or at least treat his subject matter seriously.

James speaks of being shocked that Anthony Trollope acknowledges to his readers that "he and this trusting friend are only 'making believe.'"] Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime.

3.7 FURTHER READING

Henry James (Ed. Morris Shapira): Selected Literary Criticism, Heinemann, 1968

Henry James: The Art of Novel, Prefaces with an Introduction by R.P.Blackmur

Henry James: Notes on Novelists, New York, 1916

Henry James: French Poets and Novelist: Macmillan& Co. New York 1893.

F.O. Matthiessen& Kenneth B.Murdock, The Notebook of Henry James' OUP, 1947.

Henry James. A Collection of Critical Essays Ed. Leon Edel , 1968

BLOCK - I
POETRY

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UNIT 4 THE RAVEN EDGAR ALLAN POE

Structure

4.0 INTRODUCTION

"The Raven" is a narrative poem by American writer Edgar Allan Poe. First published in January 1845, the poem is often noted for its musicality, stylized language, and supernatural atmosphere. It tells of a talking raven's mysterious visit to a distraught lover, tracing the man's slow fall into madness. The lover, often identified as a student, is lamenting the loss of his love, Lenore. Sitting on a bust of Pallas, the raven seems to further distress the protagonist with its constant repetition of the word "Nevermore". The poem makes use of folk, mythological, religious, and classical references.

Poe claimed to have written the poem logically and methodically, intending to create a poem that would appeal to both critical and popular tastes, as he explained in his 1846 follow-up essay, "The Philosophy of Composition". The poem was inspired in part by a talking raven in the novel *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty* by Charles Dickens.Poe borrows the complex rhythm and meter of Elizabeth Barrett's poem "Lady Geraldine's Courtship", and makes use of internal rhyme as well as alliteration throughout.

"The Raven" was first attributed to Poe in print in the *New York Evening Mirror* on January 29, 1845. Its publication made Poe popular in his lifetime, although it did not bring him much financial success. The poem was soon reprinted, parodied, and illustrated. Critical opinion is divided as to the poem's literary status, but it nevertheless remains one of the most famous poems ever written.

4.1 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Edgar Allan Poe (/poŠ/; born Edgar Poe; January 19, 1809 – October 7, 1849) was an American writer, editor, and literary critic. Poe is best known for his poetry and short stories, particularly his tales of mystery and the macabre. He is widely regarded as a central figure of Romanticism in the United States and of American literature as a whole, and he was one of the country's earliest practitioners of the short story. He is generally considered the inventor of the detective fiction genre and is further credited with contributing to the emerging genre of science fiction. He was the first well-known American writer to earn a living through writing alone, resulting in a financially difficult life and career.

Poe was born in Boston, the second child of actors David and Elizabeth "Eliza" Arnold Hopkins Poe. His father abandoned the family in 1810, and his mother died the following year. Thus orphaned, the child was taken in by John and Frances Allan of Richmond, Virginia. They never formally adopted him, but he was with them well into young adulthood. Tension developed later as John Allan and Edgar Poe repeatedly clashed over debts, including those incurred by gambling, and the cost of Poe's secondary education.

He attended the University of Virginia but left after a year due to lack of money. Edgar Poe quarreled with John Allan over the funds for his education and enlisted in the Army in 1827 under an assumed name. It was at this time that his publishing career began with the anonymous collection *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827), credited only to "a Bostonian". Edgar Poe and John Allan reached a temporary rapprochement after the death of Frances Allan in 1829. Poe later failed as an officer cadet at West Point, declaring a firm wishes to be a poet and writer, and he ultimately parted ways with John Allan.

Poe switched his focus to prose and spent the next several years working for literary journals and periodicals, becoming known for his own style of literary criticism. His work forced him to move among several cities, including Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City. He married his 13-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm, in 1836. In January 1845, Poe published his poem "The Raven" to instant success, but Virginia died of tuberculosis two years after its publication.

Poe planned for years to produce his own journal *The Penn* (later renamed *The Stylus*), but before it could be produced, he died in Baltimore on October 7, 1849, at age 40. The cause of his death is unknown and has been variously attributed to alcohol, "brain congestion", cholera, drugs, heart disease, rabies, suicide, tuberculosis, and other causes.

Poe and his works influenced literature around the world, as well as specialized fields such as cosmology and cryptography. He and his work appear throughout popular culture in literature, music, films, and television. A number of his homes are dedicated museums today. The Mystery Writers of America present

an annual award known as the Edgar Award for distinguished work in the mystery genre.

4.2 TEXT

The Raven Edgar Allan Poe

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—
Only this and nothing more."

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Nameless *here* for evermore.

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating
"Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door—
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;—
This it is and nothing more."

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
"Sir," said I, "or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you"—here I opened wide the door;—
Darkness there and nothing more.
Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore?"
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore!"—
Merely this and nothing more.

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,
Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.
“Surely,” said I, “surely that is something at my window lattice;
Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore—
Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore;—
“Tis the wind and nothing more!”

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore;
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door—
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
“Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,” I said, “art sure no craven,
Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly shore—
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!”
Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—
Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,
With such name as “Nevermore.”

But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
Nothing farther then he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—
Till I scarcely more than muttered “Other friends have flown before—
On the morrow *he* will leave me, as my Hopes have flown before.”
Then the bird said “Nevermore.”

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
“Doubtless,” said I, “what it utters is its only stock and store

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Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
Of 'Never—nevermore'."

But the Raven still beguiling all my fancy into smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and bust and door;
Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
Meant in croaking "Nevermore."

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core;
This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o'er,
But whose velvet-violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o'er,
She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
"Wretch," I cried, "thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee
Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore;
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—
On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—
Is there—*is* there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore."
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

“Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked, upstarting—
“Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”
Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore!

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4.3 CRITICAL APPRECIATION

Edgar Allen Poe, when people see his name many think of scary or melancholy. He has written many literary works that have traveled through the ages and become classics studied everywhere. The Raven published in January of 1845 by The Evening Mirror was the poem that escalated Poe into poet status.

Originally it is said that Poe went to his former employer a man named Rex Graham and tried to sell the poem to him but was politely declined but given 15 dollars as a simple charity.1 He later sold the poem to The American Review which gave him 9 dollars for it but published under a pseudonym of Quarles which was an English poet at the time. It was not until January 29, 1845 that The Evening Mirror gave Poe his fame and published The Raven under his actual name. The poem was an instant success and set his writing career soaring. There was much debate and discussion about the meaning and the symbolism of this poem once published. It caused quite a stir in the literary community. Critical opinion was divided as to this poems status but it has remained one of the most famous poems ever written.

Because of the poems great success Poe wrote a follow up essay called The Philosophy of Composition which described the working of The Raven. He stated that the poem was written as if it was a mathematical problem. He stressed that the reader must be able to read the poem in its entirety in just one sitting. He believed you lost the meaning of the poem and the reader if they had to come back to it. They should be able to take it all in one read. Poe stated that a poem should stay somewhere around a hundred lines. The Raven has exactly 108 lines. This poem was actually written backwards. He wrote the 3rd to the last stanza first and then wrote backwards from there. He stated that the effect was determined

first then the whole plot so the web will grow backwards from there for a single effect. Poe was a great believer that to truly write anything one must first have a truly great plot.

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The symbolism in The Raven has been the most debated. Poe's use of a raven in his poem has always been of great interest. Many believe he drew from many references. In Norse mythology Odin had two ravens Huginn and Muninn which represented though and memory. The book of Genesis makes the raven out to be a bird of ill omen. According to Hebrew folklore, Noah sends a white raven out to check conditions while on the ark. It learns that the flood waters are receding, but doesn't come immediately back with the news. It is punished by being turned black and forced to feed on carrion forever.

According to Adams in Ovids's Metamorphoses, a raven also begins as white before Apollo punishes it by turning it black for delivering a message of a lover's unfaithfulness. A lot of his critics believe this is some of the history he may have pulled upon when deciding about what type of bird to use. By choosing the raven it made the poem more dark and supernatural, especially when Poe is describing the environment the young lover is sitting in while pining over his lost Lenore. In The Philosophy of Composition Poe stated that he had actually considered using a parrot for the bird but it did not give the supernatural and foreboding feeling that the raven would.

The raven's only spoken word through the whole poem is "nevermore". To give this more power in the poem he has the bird come in an perch on the bust of Pallus. This represents the goddess of wisdom. He chose this so that when the raven speaks the words nevermore it will possibly give him an air of wisdom instead "stock and store" being the only word he knows and just speaks it randomly. He believed by using the raven and having it speak this one word throughout the whole poem it made the "nevermores" much more powerful when spoken in response to the narrator or young man's questions. Each time the narrator would ask a question the raven simply answered nevermore. He wanted to use something that would be utterly non-reasoning so it would have a powerful meaning when speaking, thus the use of the bird.

The poem is about an allegedly young man who is sitting alone on a dark and very bleak December night pining over the loss of his one true love Lenore. He is reading books of lore to help ease the pain of his loss. It is then that he hears the tapping on the chamber door and opens it to find only emptiness.

One can almost feel the bleakness and the loneness he must have felt being alone in his study with barely a fire left and everything dark around him. It almost is letting you think he is completely lost in his own misery from his loss. Everything is bleak and dark. When the raven comes a tapping he at first is startled and then starts questioning that maybe it is something else. He believes it could be the devil come to torture him over his loss. He says the raven is from the night's plutonian shore or a messenger for the afterlife. When after each inquiry he gives the bird it

only responds as nevermore. At first the nevermore response is taken as a silly bird that has only learned only one word and has accidentally flown from his master place, but when the bird actually makes his appearance and sits upon the bust of Pallus the young narrator starts to think maybe there is more to this raven than meets the eye.

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When the bird has perched upon the bust the young man is mesmerized by his presence and pulls up a chair. He is now cast in the shadow of this mysterious bird and cannot leave his spot. He believes many different things of this bird always inquiring about his lost Lenore. The bird simply answers "nevermore". This at first agitates the man but as the poem continues towards the end he simply admits that his soul is trapped forever under the raven's shadow not to be lifted "nevermore". Here is when one could believe that this is the turning point where the young narrator has finally given in to his sadness and simply doesn't want to go on anymore without his beloved Lenore. The poem is actually sad. A young man has lost the love of his life and is simply alone in this world and is having trouble entertaining the thought of going on without his missed and mourned love.

The whole mood of this poem is very Poe. Its dark and melancholy and scary no wonder so many have reprinted it. Another thing this poem is noted for is its poetic structure. This poem was made up of 18 stanzas with 6 lines each. According to Richard Kopely the meter is trochaic octameter-eight trochaic feet per line, with each foot having one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable.4 Poe claims that the poem is a combination of octameter acatalectic, heptameter catalectic and tetrameter catalectic. The rhyme scheme is ABCBBB or AA,B,CC,CB,B,B when accounting for the internal rhyme.

Another structure that this poem uses heavily is alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in a series of words. An example would be such as doubting, dreaming dreams. Edgar Allen Poe was also reported as having a very extensive vocabulary. He would many times use words that were not commonly used. In The Raven Poe used ancient and poetic language together because he thought it was appropriate because of the meaning of the poem, A young lover who spends most of his time with books of "forgotten Lore". Examples of words he used in this poem are Seraphim which is a six winged angel standing in the presence of God.

Another is Nepenthe which is a potion used by ancients to induce forgetfulness or sorrow. Balm of Gilead is a soothing ointment made in Palestine. Plutonian the God of the underworld in Roman mythology. Poe believed the use of these words only enhanced the meaning he wanted to achieve in writing The Raven. The internal words of rapping and tapping and napping create an internal rhyme that is said to be almost musical and combined with the alliteration it becomes hypnotic. Onomatopoeia is also used throughout this poem. This is words that sound like what they describe. An example would be in lines 13-18 where rustling is used.

As mentioned earlier the publication of The Raven made Edgar Allen Poe and instant success. Not only was it printed for its large demand but also parodied. These showed up all over the North. There were some downfalls to this publication. Although loved and adored there were some who simply did not believe he actually wrote it. Some believed he stole it from a Charles Dickens Story titled Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty. The ravens in both stories are said to bear a great resemblance. An anonymous writer is said to have written in to The Evening Mirror the publication who printed The Raven and suggested that it was plagiarized from a poem called The Bird of the Dream by an unnamed author. They stated that 18 similarities between the poems existed.

At Poe's death his friend Thomas Chivers claimed that Poe's Raven was plagiarized from one of his poem's and also claimed he was the inspiration for the meter of the poem. Whatever the case Edgar Allen Poe will always be the one credited for the great masterpiece. Many speculate that he wrote this poem in either 10 days or maybe 10 years one will never know. This poem did not bring him much financial success but did make him a literary success. His friend Elizabeth Barett wrote and told Poe that his "raven" had created a big sensation over in England. Many of her friends are overtaken with fear while others are by the music the lyrics seem to display as you read. Poe received many invitations public and private to recite this poem. Many thought just to hear him recite this poem was an event in one's life. Poe would come in and turn the lamp light low until the entire room was almost dark.

He would then stand near the center of the room and start to recite his poem in a very commanding voice. It was state that the chosen he read this poem to were so mesmerized that they would almost not draw a breathe out of fright until he was done reading this poem. It takes quite a literary genius to illicit this kind of response from an audience listening to something you wrote. One can only imagine what the mood of the room must have been like, the room dark and foreboding and then one lone voice speaking of a lone young man who is lost and lonely and mourning the loss of his love. It takes a gifted writer to bring these kinds of emotions to a reader. Not many have come down in our literary history, especially one who can bring so many emotions to the table when reading one of his poems. All of his works seem to bring signs of foreboding or gloom around the corner. Edgar Allen Poe is renowned with this reputation. If it is dark and melancholy then it has to be Poe.

4.4 CHECK YOUR PROGESS QUESTIONS

- What noise sets off the bizarre events of the poem? What does the narrator tell himself it is? Why do you think he does? Have you ever experienced a similar situation?
- Describe how the narrator first opens his chamber door. What happens next? What do you think that means?

- After he finds there is no one at the door, what is the next thing he checks for the source of the tapping?
- What is the narrator's first question to the raven? The response? What does the narrator think this means at first? Does this make sense or is the narrator simply in denial?
- Does the narrator have a rational reaction to this strange bird in his room? Why doesn't he try to catch it and take it back outside? What does he do instead?
- What is the narrator's rationalization about why the bird only says 'Nevermore'? What makes him think of Lenore? Is that connected to the raven somehow?
- Upon what does the raven perch? What is the deeper meaning of that statue? How does it relate to the raven?
- How would you describe the atmosphere of the chamber before the raven enters? Why?
- How would you describe the atmosphere of the chamber after the raven enters? What has changed? Why?
- What time of day is it when the narrator first hears the tapping? What time of year is it? Do either of these have a symbolic meaning? How does that relate to the events of the poem?
- What significant event in the narrator's life has occurred before the events in this poem happen? How has it affected him?

4.5 SUMMARY

On a midnight in December, the speaker reads over old books for the purpose of easing his sadness over the death of his beloved Lenore. He falls into a doze, only to wake when he hears a knock on his door. As he sits debating who could be at his door, his imagination begins to run away with him. He finally convinces himself that it is just a late-night visitor at his door and asks for forgiveness for his hesitation in answering. He'd been napping, he explains to the visitor as he approaches the door, and wasn't sure he'd actually heard the knocking, thinking it might have been a dream. However, when he opens the door, there is no one there. He stands in the doorway, gazing into the darkness and doubting his senses. He thinks he hears a whispered word—"Lenore"—before going back inside his room. Soon he hears a tapping at his window. He suspects it is the wind and goes to investigate. When he opens the window a raven steps inside. It flies into the room and perches on the bust of Pallas Athena that sits above his door. At first the speaker is amused by the raven's manner. He asks the bird's name, to which the raven replies, "Nevermore." The speaker is surprised that the raven can speak, even though the word it says doesn't make sense in context. The raven says nothing else, sitting silently on the statue.

The speaker mentions with a sense of sorrow that the raven—like everyone else in his life—will leave him in the morning. Once again, the raven croaks, "Nevermore." He is shocked, but then explains away the bird's utterance as a sign of the bird's previous owner's terrible misfortunes. He still finds the bird interesting and amusing, and so takes a seat in front of the bird and the bust.

He tries to figure out what the bird means by "nevermore." As he sits, he thinks of his lost love, Lenore, who will never again sit in the chair. At the thought of her, the speaker feels something in the air and smells incense in the closed room. He gets angry, asking for a potion of some kind that will make him forget Lenore and the memories of her that torture him. The raven replies, "Nevermore," enraging him further. The speaker calls the bird a prophet, but whether for good or evil remains to be seen. He asks the bird if there is "balm in Gilead" that will quell the pain of his remembrance. The Raven answers once again: "Nevermore." Next, the speaker asks the bird if he has any hope of reuniting with Lenore in heaven.

The raven replies with the same answer as always, driving the speaker into further fits of rage. Furiously he orders the raven to leave him to his loneliness and despair. The raven again says, "Nevermore." The final stanza, which moves into the present of the speaker's retelling, sees the raven still sitting in the chamber, perched on the bust of Pallas Athena. The speaker has succumbed fully to his despair and sees himself engulfed in the raven's shadow forever.

The Supernatural

References to the supernatural are rife within "The Raven." While Poe never confirms whether the raven is a supernatural entity or a product of the speaker's subconscious, an argument can still be made from clues within the text. He first hears a knock on his chamber door, only to open it and find no one there. Yet before opening it, he is struck with a terror of the unknown. Overcoming his fears, he gazes into the empty corridor and thinks he hears a whispered "Lenore" in response to his own whispered question. He's already grieving for his lost love, already primed to be haunted by her ghost as he tries to lose himself in study to stop dwelling on his memories of her. With the arrival of the raven, more supernatural elements creep into the poem. The raven itself is often used as a supernatural emissary, a way of communicating with the unknown. The speaker questions where the bird might have come from. He equates the bird's source with Pluto, the Roman god of the Underworld, cementing further the idea of ghostly communications about the afterlife.

In a later stanza, the speaker thinks he smells incense from "some unseen censer swung by Seraphim," which brings the supposed presence of angels into the poem. Is the speaker hallucinating or is he being visited by a heavenly being? Is he being haunted by actual creatures or by the grief in his own mind? The angels are a heavenly force, negated by the raven's own darkness and its answers of "nevermore" to the speaker's queries. The raven is given more sinister intent by

the end of the poem, as it stays perched on the statue of Athena. It looks down on the speaker, seemingly casting some kind of spell on him, snaring his soul in its shadow. Whether the speaker succumbed to his grief or the sinister force animating the raven is something we are left to ponder. The poem walks the line between suggesting the presence of forces of the subconscious and forces of the supernatural, giving it much of its narrative punch.

Setting and Mood

Poe uses atmosphere to build the dread evident in the last line of the poem. Every choice he makes is designed to create one singular effect on the reader. To that end, Poe chooses the time of day and year for a specific purpose. It is midnight, the closing of the day, in December, the last month of the year. The day is ending and the year is ending, reinforcing the imagery of death already present in the poem, as when the speaker notes how "each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor." Images and words combine to evoke death—the dying of the day, of the year, of the fire, of Lenore. This line also enhances the supernatural element of the poem by introducing the idea of things beyond our knowledge at work with the mention of a ghost, soon to be reinforced by a mysterious knocking and the feeling of a strange presence.

The room the speaker sits in also sets the mood of the poem, and it is complete with all the trappings of Gothic literature. The speaker sits alone in the dark on a bleak, stormy December night. He's studying to distract himself from constant thoughts of Lenore, his dead love. Shadows are thrown throughout the room by the light of the dying fire. He's disturbed by the arrival of the raven in a flurry of wind and swirling curtains, an entrance rife with drama and portent. Poe seeds the poem with images of darkness that encroach more and more on the speaker. It's night, the fire is dying, and there is a storm brewing outside the room. When the speaker opens the door, all that greets him is a darkened, empty hallway. The raven is a black bird that casts a long shadow that will eventually envelop the speaker, symbolizing the darkness in his soul.

Rationality and Madness

As "The Raven" progresses, the speaker is consumed with his memories of Lenore. She's mentioned in passing in the second stanza, "Nameless *here* for evermore." She is always on his mind, as shown in the fifth stanza: "And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore?" This I whispered and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore!"—." When he opens his door to find no one there, he immediately makes the jump to Lenore. This is another instance of the Gothic sensibility that infuses the poem—the possible presence of the supernatural. Was there someone at the door or did the speaker imagine the knocking? Is the speaker being haunted by Lenore? Is it all in his head? Is he mad? Is he a reliable speaker? These are questions we have to ask as we continue on with the speaker's story.

The speaker's emotional state shifts throughout the course of "The Raven," and the narrative voice reflects this change. In the first stanza he is calm, if weary and melancholy. As the poem a progress, his agitation grows as his imagination or the supernatural begins to assault him. Once the raven appears, the speaker attempts to explain its presence and strangeness through rational means. Again, there is an air of the otherworldly about the bird's arrival: "In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore; Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he; But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door."

The raven is described with human characteristics; the speaker uses aristocratic terms, giving it a proud air. It does not ask permission, but rather steps inside as if it owns the place. The speaker is first pleased by the arrival of the raven, and amused by its behavior. He wonders if it was sent by angels as some messenger to bring him comfort. Here the speaker's state of mind is suspect. He is attributing human behavior to an animal. Is he mad? Has he gone insane from the grief of losing Lenore or is there more to this raven than meets the eye?

His rational arguments continue to break down as the raven gives him one word answers. At first, the speaker is amused by the bird's aspect, going so far as to ask for its "lordly name," and surprised when it answers him. But as the poem progresses, the speaker's explanations and questions become more desperate and his mental stability must be called into question. He thinks he smells incense: "Then, me thought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer Swung by Seraphim," reminding us of his deteriorating mental state and the Gothic sensibilities of the poem. Are there angels present or is this just a delusion brought on by grief? He grows more anxious and angrier with each of the raven's utterances of "Nevermore."

Now, he believes the bird was sent by dark forces to torment him, to deprive him of the hope of being reunited with Lenore. Eventually the speaker yells at the bird, calling it, "Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil! prophet still, if bird or devil!" and pleading with it to give him answers to his questions. He verges on hopelessness, already suspecting the answer the bird will give him "Nevermore" but compelled to ask anyway. The breakdown of his mental state is reflected in his narration. He alternately begs and yells at the bird in later stanzas, eventually ordering it out of his house. The narrative voice changes from one of logic to one of madness. When the bird tells him that he will not be reunited with Lenore in the afterlife, the speaker loses hope entirely, his reason overthrown. This is evident in the final lines of the poem: "And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming, and the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor; And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted—nevermore!"

The speaker is no longer seeking escape from his remembrance; he is wallowing in his grief. The speaker's despair has overwhelmed him, his logical arguments abandoned as the bird sits atop the bust of Pallas Athena, the goddess of wisdom, looking down on him. The final image intimates that rationality (Athena)

has been overthrown by irrationality (the raven). With the final line, we can see that he has succumbed to a grief-driven madness and the dread that has been haunting both the speaker and the reader has finally arrived.

4.6 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Discuss the use of symbols in Poe's "The Raven."

This essay should identify the major symbols used in the poem, and discuss what effect each has. The most important symbol is the raven itself, with its dark and gloomy appearance lending a sense of inevitability. Other symbols include the Bust of Pallas, who is the Goddess of Wisdom, and the beautiful chamber, which is reminiscent of the beauty of the lost Lenore.

2. Explore the parallels between "The Raven" and Poe's own life.

This essay should focus on Poe's life circumstances at the time of writing, particularly the decline in his wife, Virginia's, health, and the deaths of other women in his life. The sense of doom in the poem should be related to Poe's pessimism about his own life.

3. The Raven has an undeniable atmosphere of doom. Discuss how this atmosphere is created.

This essay should explore how the different elements of the poem combine to create this atmosphere of doom. Elements which should be discussed include the poem's subject matter, rhyme and meter, symbolism and word choice.

4. In his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe explored the process he used to write "The Raven." How well does his poem meet the requirements set out in his essay?

This essay should detail the main elements of a good poem, as enunciated by Poe – namely a single effect, brevity, an impression of beauty and a tone of sadness. Each element should be applied to the poem in question.

5. Analyze the mood and tone of Poe's "The Raven."

This essay should focus on the melancholy and dreary mood of the poem. This is created by the choice of words (Gaunt, dreary), the chain of events and the foreboding of the repeated word "Nevermore."

6. Is "The Raven" just a tale of a talking bird? What deeper themes does it explore?

This essay should focus on the themes of the poem – beauty, despair, destiny and horror. The bird is included not to overshadow the themes but to aid in their exploration.

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7. In what ways is "The Raven" representative of Poe's use of beautiful women in his work?

This essay should compare Lenore – a woman of great beauty – with female figures in Poe's other works. The important point here is the predominance of beautiful women who are either mortally ill or already dead. Examples could include Eleanora, Madeline Usher and Ligeia.

UNIT 5 WHEN LILACS LAST IN THE DOORYARD BLOOM'D - WALT WHITMAN

Structure

5.0 INTRODUCTION

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is a long poem in the form of an elegy written byAmerican poet Walt Whitman (1819–1892) in 1865. The poem, written in free verse in 206 lines, uses many of the literary techniques associated with the pastoral elegy. It was written in the summer of 1865 during a period of profound national mourning in the aftermath of the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865. Despite the poem being an elegy to the fallen president, Whitman neither mentions Lincoln by name nor discusses the circumstances of his death. Instead, Whitman uses a series of rural and natural imagery including the symbols of the lilacs, a drooping star in the western sky (Venus), and the hermit thrush, and employs the traditional progression of the pastoral elegy in moving from grief toward an acceptance and knowledge of death. The poem also addresses the pity of war through imagery vaguely referencing the American Civil War (1861–1865) which ended only days before the assassination.

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" was written ten years after publishing the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and it reflects a maturing of Whitman's poetic vision from a drama of identity and romantic exuberance that has been tempered by his emotional experience of the American Civil War. Whitman included the poem as part of a quickly-written sequel to a collection of poems addressing the war that was being printed at the time of Lincoln's death. These poems, collected under the title *Drum-Taps* and*Sequel to Drum-Taps*, range in emotional context from "excitement to woe, from distant observation to engagement, from belief to resignation" and "more concerned with history than the self, more aware of the precariousness of America's present and future than of its expansive promise." First published in autumn 1865, "When Lilacs Last in the

Dooryard Bloom'd"—along with 42 other poems from *Drum-Taps* and*Sequel to Drum-Taps*—was absorbed into *Leaves of Grass* beginning with the fourth edition, published in 1867.

Although Whitman did not consider the poem to be among his best works, it is compared in both effect and quality to several acclaimed works of English literature, including elegies such as John Milton's *Lycidas* (1637) and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Adonis* (1821).

5.1 OBJECTIVES

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd- is an elegy on the death of Abraham Lincoln, though it never mentions the president by name. Like most elegies, it develops from the personal (the death of Lincoln and the poet's grief) to the impersonal (the death of "all of you" and death itself); from an intense feeling of grief to the thought of reconciliation. The poem, which is one of the finest, Whitman ever wrote, is a dramatization of this feeling of loss. This elegy is grander and more touching than Whitman's other two elegies on Lincoln's death, "0 Captain! My Captain!" and "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day." The form is elegiac but also contains elements found in operatic music, such as the aria and recitative. The song of the hermit thrush, for example, is an "aria."

Abraham Lincoln was shot in Washington, D.C., by Booth on April 14, 1865, and died the following day. The body was sent by train from Washington to Springfield, Illinois. As it crossed the continent, it was saluted by the people of America. Whitman has not only men and women but even natural objects saluting the dead man.

5.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walt Whitman (/ÈhwjtmYn/; May 31, 1819 – March 26, 1892) was an American poet, essayist, and journalist. A humanist, he was a part of the transition between transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works. Whitman is among the most influential poets in the American canon, often called the father of free verse.His work was controversial in its time, particularly his poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, which was described as obscene for its overt sensuality. Whitman's own life came under scrutiny for his presumed homosexuality.

Born in Huntington on Long Island, Whitman worked as a journalist, a teacher, and a government clerk. At age 11, he left formal schooling to go to work. As a child and through much of his career he resided in Brooklyn. Whitman's major work, *Leaves of Grass*, was first published in 1855 with his own money. The work was an attempt at reaching out to the common person with an American epic. He continued expanding and revising it until his death in 1892. During the American Civil War, he went to Washington, D.C. and worked in

hospitals caring for the wounded. His poetry often focused on both loss and healing. Two of his well-known poems, "O Captain! My Captain!" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", were written on the death of Abraham Lincoln. After a stroke towards the end of his life, Whitman moved to Camden, New Jersey, where his health further declined. When he died at age 72, his funeral was a public event.

Whitman's influence on poetry remains strong. Mary Smith Whitall Costelloe argued: "You cannot really understand America without Walt Whitman, without *Leaves of Grass* ... He has expressed that civilization, 'up to date,' as he would say, and no student of the philosophy of history can do without him." Modernist poet Ezra Pound called Whitman "America's poet

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5.3 TEXT

WHEN LILACS LAST IN THE DOORYARD BLOOM'D

Walt Whitman

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

- powerful western fallen star!
- shades of night—O moody, tearful night!
- great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!
- cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!
- harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings,
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,
With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
A sprig with its flower I break.

In the swamp in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

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Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,
Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know,
If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.)

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the ground, spotting the gray debris,
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass,
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land,
With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped in black,
With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women standing,
With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,
With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads,
With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn,
With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,
The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid these you journey,
With the tolling tolling bells' perpetual clang,
Here, coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac.

Nor for you, for one alone,
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,
For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O sane and sacred death

All over bouquets of roses,
O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you and the coffins all of you O death.)

O western orb sailing the heaven,
Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk'd,
As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,
As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,
As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all look'd on,)
As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me from sleep,)
As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe,
As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night,
As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black of the night,
As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb,
Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

Sing on there in the swamp,
O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call,
I hear, I come presently, I understand you,
But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me,
The star my departing comrade holds and detains me.

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?
And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?
And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love?

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Sea-winds blown from east and west,
Blown from the Eastern sea and blown from the Western sea, till there on the prairies meeting,

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These and with these and the breath of my chant,
I'll perfume the grave of him I love.

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?
And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,
To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,
With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid and bright,
With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding the air,
With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the trees prolific,
In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there,
With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky, and shadows,
And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys,
And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward returning.

Lo, body and soul—this land,
My own Manhattan with spires, and the sparkling and hurrying tides, and the ships,
The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light, Ohio's shores and flashing Missouri,
And ever the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and corn.

Lo, the most excellent sun so calm and haughty,
The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes,
The gentle soft-born measureless light,
The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon,
The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars,
Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.

Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird,
Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes,
Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines.

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Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song,
Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe.

O liquid and free and tender!
O wild and loose to my soul—O wondrous singer!
You only I hear—yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,)
Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me.

Now while I sat in the day and look'd forth,
In the close of the day with its light and the fields of spring, and the farmers preparing their crops,
In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and forests,
In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds and the storms,)
Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the voices of children and women,
The many-moving sea-tides, and I saw the ships how they sail'd,
And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy with labor,
And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its meals and minutia of daily usages,
And the streets how their throbbings throbb'd, and the cities pent—lo, then and there,
Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest,
Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,
And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,
And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions,
I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness,
To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me,
The gray-brown bird I know receiv'd us comrades three,
And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love.

From deep secluded recesses,
From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still,
Came the carol of the bird.

And the charm of the carol rapt me,
As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night,
And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird.

Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.

Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.

Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly.

Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead,
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.

From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee,

And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.

The night in silence under many a star,
The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,
And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.

Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide,
Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.

To the tally of my soul,
Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird,
With pure deliberate notes spreading filling the night.

Loud in the pines and cedars dim,
Clear in the freshness moist and the swamp-perfume,
And I with my comrades there in the night.

While my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed,
As to long panoramas of visions.

And I saw askant the armies,
I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,
Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles I saw them,
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody,
And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,)
And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,

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But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,
The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

Passing the visions, passing the night,
Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands,
Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul,
Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song,
As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding the night,
Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again bursting with joy,
Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven,
As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,
Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,
I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring.

I cease from my song for thee,
From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee,
O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night.

Yet each to keep and all, retrievements out of the night,
The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,
And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,
With the lustrous and drooping star with the countenance full of woe,
With the holders holding my hand nearing the call of the bird,
Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep, for the dead I loved so well,
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands—and this for his dear sake,
Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.

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5.4 CRITICAL APPRECIATION

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is one of the most famous poems of Walt Whitman. It is one of four elegies entitled 'Memories of President Lincoln'. An elegy is a lyric poem setting forth the poet's mediations upon death. It is characterized by conventional language expressing with dignity and decorum a formal grief. The classical form of the elegy is common to both Latin and Greek literature.

'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed' is a long elegy in sixteen sections on death of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of America. Whitman loved him who waged a civil war for the freedom of the Negro slaves and saved his country from disintegration. He loved Lincoln for his honesty, sympathy, courage, and determination. So Whitman was profoundly shocked by his assassination in April 1865, soon after his the concussion of the American civil war.

When Lilac Last at the Dooryard Bloomed is an elegy on the death of Abraham Lincoln. Like most elegies, it develops from the personal to the impersonal from an intense feeling of grief to the thought of reconciliation. The poem, which is one of the finest, Whitman ever wrote, is a dramatization of this feeling of loss.

The first cycle of the poem, section, presents the setting in clear perspective. As spring returns, the lilacs blossom, and the plant Venus "nearly dropp'd in the western sky," the poet mourns the loss 'of him I love'. He mourns the 'powerful western fallen star' now covered by 'black murk' in the 'tearful night' and he is powerless and helpless because they could around him 'will not free my soul'.

The second cycle of the poem, describes the journey of the coffin through natural scenery and industrial cities, both representing facets of American life.

In the third cycle of the poem, the poet wonders how he shall sing *"for the large sweet soul that has gone"*. How shall he compose his tribute for the *"dead one there I loved"?* The pictures on the dead president's tomb, he says, should be of spring and sun and Leaves, a river, hills, and the sky, the city dense with dwellings, and people at work-in short, all the scenes of life. It comprises a perspective of immortality. The poet remembers that one day while he sat in the peaceful but 'unconscious scenery of my land', a cloud with a 'long black trail' appeared and enveloped everything. Suddenly he knew death. He walked between the knowledge of death and the thought of death.

Thus the poem begins with an invocation to spring, continuous description of nature joining in the mourning over death of the great man, description of the procession of mourners, and flowers brought to deck the hearse. And there is a closing consolation that death is powerful over everything and at the dead only full rest, and the realization that death is the entry to a higher life.

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Check Your Progress

1. What are the three biggest symbols (the "trinity") in the poem? What does each symbol represent and why are they all so important?
2. How is Whitman's elegy different from other elegies (like "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard")? How does the speaker make us feel and think differently about death?
3. How does the speaker create a sense of unity throughout the poem? How does this unified feeling contribute to our understanding of death in the poem?
4. How would you describe the speaker's voice in the poem? Do his changing moods contribute anything to our understanding of death and grieving? How do you know?
5. How might the poem have sounded different if Whitman chose to go with a prescribed rhyme and meter rather than free verse?
6. Would the poem's meaning have been any different? Why or why not?

5.5 SUMMARY

This 1865 poem is part of a series of pieces written after Lincoln's assassination. While it does not display all the conventions of the form, this is nevertheless considered to be a pastoral elegy: a poem of mourning that makes use of elaborate conventions drawn from the natural world and rustic human society. Virgil is the most prominent classical practitioner of the form; Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais" are the two best-known examples in the English tradition.

One of the most important features of the pastoral elegy is the depiction of the deceased and the poet who mourns him as shepherds. While the association is not specifically made in this poem, it must surely have been in Whitman's mind as he wrote: Lincoln, in many ways, was the "shepherd" of the American people during wartime, and his loss left the North in the position of a flock without a leader. As in traditional pastoral elegies, nature mourns Lincoln's death in this poem, although it does so in some rather unconventional ways (more on that in a moment).

The poem also makes reference to the problems of modern times in its brief, shadowy depictions of Civil War battles. The natural order is contrasted with the human one, and Whitman goes so far as to suggest that those who have died violent deaths in war are actually the lucky ones, since they are now beyond suffering.

Above all this is a public poem of private mourning. In it Whitman tries to determine the best way to mourn a public figure, and the best way to mourn in a

modern world. In his resignation at the end of the poem, and in his use of disconnected motifs, he suggests that the kind of ceremonial poetry a pastoral elegy represents may no longer have a place in society; instead, symbolic, intensely personal forms must take over.

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is composed of three separate yet simultaneous poems. One follows the progress of Lincoln's coffin on its way to the president's burial. The second stays with the poet and his sprig of lilac, meant to be laid on the coffin in tribute, as he ruminates on death and mourning. The third uses the symbols of a bird and a star to develop an idea of a nature sympathetic to yet separate from humanity. The progression of the coffin is followed by a sad irony. Mourners, dressed in black and holding offerings of flowers, turn out in the streets to see Lincoln's corpse pass by. The Civil War is raging, though, and many of these people have surely lost loved ones of their own. Yet their losses are subsumed in a greater national tragedy, which in its public ness and in the fact that this poem is being written as part of the mourning process, is set up to be a far greater loss than that of their own family members. In this way the poem implicitly asks the question, "What is the worth of a man? Are some men worth more than others?" The poet's eventual inability to mourn, and the depictions of anonymous death on the battlefields, suggest that something is wrong here.

The poet vacillates on the nature of symbolic mourning. At times he seems to see his offering of the lilac blossom as being symbolically given to all the dead; at other moments he sees it as futile, merely a broken twig. He wonders how best to do honor to the dead, asking how he would decorate the tomb. He suggests that he would fill it with portraits of everyday life and everyday men. This is a far cry from the classical statuary and elaborate floral arrangements usually associated with tombs. The language in the poem follows a similar shift. In the first stanzas the language is formal and at times even archaic, filled with exhortations and rhetorical devices. By the end much of the ceremoniousness has been stripped away; the poet offers only "lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of [his] soul." Eventually the poet simply leaves behind the sprig of lilac, and "cease[s] from [his] song," still unsure of just how to mourn properly.

The final image of the poem is of "the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim." All has been worked through save nature, which remains separate and beyond. The death-song of the bird expresses an understanding and a beauty that Whitman, even while he incorporates it into his poem, cannot quite master for himself. Unlike the pastoral elegies of old, which use a temporary rift with nature to comment on modernity, this one shows a profound and permanent disconnection between the human and natural worlds. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" mourns for Lincoln in a way that is all the more profound for seeing the president's death as only a smaller, albeit highly symbolic, tragedy in the midst of a world of confusion and sadness.

5.6 IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM

Walt Whitman is famous for using imagery and symbolism to convey his own thought, feelings and strong emotions to his readers. We could find a number of recurring images in all his poems. The word 'symbol' is applied only to a word or a phrase that signifies an object or event which, in turn, signifies something. His symbols are flexible and ambiguous. The things and objects like grass, the sea, the bird and the stars are the recurring symbols in the poems of Whitman.

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"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd is an elegy on the death of the 16^{th} President of American President, Abraham Lincoln. The poet uses three major symbols- the star, the lilac and the bird. It initiates the readers understand the real emotions of the poet. Lilac Flower is shown in North America. This species is widely cultivated for ornamental purposes and has been naturalized in other part of Europe.

It is not referred to an aggressive species, found in the wild, in widely scattered sites, usually in the vicinity of past or present human habitations. The poet compares Abraham Lincoln with Lilac flower. The poet used cyclic structure in this poem. Every symbol is interconnected with one another. It moves from the star to the lilac, then to the bird, next to the star and finally to the hermit – thrush. Lilac the flower symbolizes the eternal memory of Lincoln. The Western star reminds the poet of the death of Lincoln. The hermit – thrush represents the voice of spirituality. All the three symbols introduced in the beginning of the poem recur at the end of the poem also.

These symbols are taken by the poet from the time of the year when Lincoln died. The spring season portrays a constantly recurring season of birth, growth and freshness. It is a timeless reminder of Lincoln's death. The flower Lilac is symbol fertility, refers to eternal memory and love. The bird as the voice of divine is a symbol of reconciliation. These three symbols can be analyzed from another angle also. The flower Lilac refers for human love and the hermit bird symbolizes the poet's soul. The song of the bird is the music of death. It teaches men to accept the reality of death though reality is a bitter truth.

Whitman's symbols are praised for their traditional and particular. In this poem the star is a traditional symbol. When the funeral procession of Abraham Lincoln started, the evening star Venus was shined in the sky. At the same time Lilacs were in rich and full bloom. Thus the image of star and lilac are linked

together. The symbol of the Hermit Thrush is very important in this poem. It is a shy bird which can sing only "death's outlet songs "refers rebirth. It means one should aware of rebirth. The 'heart shaped' leaves of the lilac represents the fact that his love for the dead hero(Abraham Lincoln) is fresh and unfading. The fragrance of the Lilacs flower symbolizes the affection and love for Abraham Lincoln.

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UNIT 6 BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH - EMILY DICKINSON

Structure

6.0 INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson's one of the fascinating poems is 'Because I could not stop for Death'. She is one of the prominent American lyric writers in the 19th century. This poem was first published posthumously. The title is mentioned in the first line of the poem; her poems were enlisted without title and only numbered as it was published after her death. She wrote nearly 1,800 poems but only 10 were published in her lifetime. "Because I could not stop for Death" is a lyrical poem by Emily Dickinson first published posthumously in*Poems: Series 1* in 1890. Dickinson's work was never authorized to be published so it is unknown whether because I could not stop for Death was completed or "abandoned". The speaker of Dickinson's poem meets personified Death. Death is a gentleman who is riding in the horse carriage that picks up the speaker in the poem and takes the speaker on her journey to the afterlife. According to Thomas H. Johnson's variorum edition of 1955 the number of this poem is "712".

In this poem she personifies death as a gentleman who rides a carriage and stops to pick up the speaker and take a ride in his carriage. It has 6 stanzas with rhyme and meter. And she uses figures of speech such as personification, paradox, alliteration in this poem. She personifies death and immortality in this poem. And Thomas H. Johnson states that the number of this poem is '712' in 'Variorum edition of 1955.

In this unit, we will study the critical analyse of this poem.

6.1 OBJECTIVE

The primary theme in "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" is death and eternity. A secondary theme is unpreparedness. This poem is a salute to the inexorability of death, to the dogged journey it traverses. There are more than one opinion as to whether Dickinson's poem speaks of Christian consolation or not

6.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born in Massachusetts on December 10, 1830. She left her school and lived a solitary life. She secretly wrote many poems and letters in her home. Her poems were found by her sister Lavinia and were published after Dickinson's death on May 15th 1886. She is considered as one of the American's greatest poets with Walt Whitman. She is known for her short poems and usually writes with a single narrator.

Dickinson studied at Amherst Academy for seven years and then attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary for a year. She is known for her originality and didn't stick to any genre in her works. She deals with different themes such as nature, pain, love, sufferings, death and immortality, faith and grief. She is known for her short stanzas with quatrains, rhyming on the 2nd and 4th lines in the poem. While Dickinson was a prolific poet, fewer than a dozen of her nearly 1,800 poems were published during her lifetime. The poems published then were usually edited significantly to fit conventional poetic rules. Her poems were unique to her era. They contain short lines, typically lack titles, and often use slant rhyme as well as unconventional capitalization and punctuation. Many of her poems deal with themes of death and immortality, two recurring topics in letters to her friends.

Although Dickinson's acquaintances were likely aware of her writing, it was not until after her death in 1886 when Lavinia, Dickinson's younger sister, discovered her cache of poems that the breadth of her work became public. Her first collection of poetry was published in 1890 by personal acquaintances Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, though both heavily edited the content. A 1998 *New York Times* article revealed that of the many edits made to Dickinson's work, the name "Susan" was often deliberately removed. At least eleven of Dickinson's poems were dedicated to sister-in-law Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson, though all the dedications were obliterated, presumably by Todd. A complete, and mostly unaltered, collection of her poetry became available for the first time when scholar Thomas H. Johnson published *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* in 1955.

In her poems we could find full rhyme or slant rhyme. Her verse is often related with common meter which is usually used in sung music. And she punctuated her poems with dashes instead of periods and commas or any other punctuation

marks. In this unit, we will learn the critical analyse and summary of the poem, 'Because I could not stop for Death'.

6.3 TEXT

BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH

Emily Dickinson

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed us –
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity –

6.4 CRITICAL APPRECIATION

'Because I could not stop for Death' is a lyrical poem by Emily Dickinson. This poem is published posthumously in poems: series 1 in 1890. She personifies death as a suitor Youngman who drives a horse carrier and give a pickup to the speaker. It is a fascinating poem where she takes the readers to a journey. It was edited by her friends Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

She depicts a close encounter with death and immortality. Her expertise with death and immorality in the beginning of the poem make the reader feel at ease.

"Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just ourselves –
And Immortality…"

In this first stanza, she portrays death as a close friend or a suitor and she welcomes him. The pleasant note expresses her comfort with death. The pleasant note and acceptance is there in the beginning of the poem. She states that the speaker didn't have a choice about when she was to die and reminds us too in her words.

In the second stanza she states that she set down all she wanted to do in life and entered the carriage with death and immortality. She describes the both death and immortality as kind, thoughtful and gentle in this stanza. In this line, "Knew no haste…" she expresses that the death drives slowly that allows her to recollect her life.

In the third stanza, she describes how in that slow ride she thinks of her school days and her prime time in her life. Then she passes through the sun set which symbolizes the speaker's death. The speaker says the sun set is beautiful and she moves from life to eternity in the journey. In this stanza, she repeats the phrase, "we passed…" it is called anaphora.

Then in the fourth stanza, there is sudden change in the tone. After the sun set and she realizes that she feels cold and she is in unfitting attire, only in gossamer and 'Tippet'. Even though she feels comfortable in the first three stanzas, now only in that cold night she finds that she is under stressed and expresses her shame towards them.

The fifth stanza starts with the phrase, 'We paused', and she uses the stop after the first stanza to state that she reached the destination of journey. But here in the stanza, she expresses her disappointment that her new home is nothing but her grave. She expresses that she feels small, damp, eternal home and cheated by Death.

The sixth final stanza, recalls her encounter with horse counter and realizes it been centuries after that time. That line shows the speaker has died long back and' feels like shorter than a day…'it's like yesterday.

POETIC QUALITY

As far as poetic quality is concerned, poem passes through very nicely. In the poem death is personified as person 'he' means a person especially who as a lover of her. This is the use of the figure of speech-personification. We also find superficial and inner meaning in the poem. The Simplicity is achieved by clear, cut, short simple sentences.

6.5 SUMMARY

- Emily Dickinson's one of the fascinating poems is 'Because I could not stop for Death'. She is one of the prominent American lyric writers in the 19^{th} century.
- The title is mentioned in the first line of the poem, her poems were enlisted without title and only numbered as it was published after her death.
- She deals with different themes such as nature, pain, love. Sufferings, death and immortality, faith and grief.
- This poem is published posthumously in poems: series 1 in 1890.
- It was edited by her friends Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson.
- She depicts a close encounter with death and immortality
- In this first stanza, she portrays death as a close friend or a suitor and she welcomes him
- In the second stanza. She states that she set down all she wanted to do in life and entered the carriage with death and immortality
- In the third stanza, she describes how in that slow ride she thinks of her school days and her prime time in her life.
- Then in the fourth stanza, there is sudden change in the tone.
- The fifth stanza, starts with the phrase, 'We paused', and she uses the stop after the first stanza to state that she reached the destination of journey
- The sixth final stanza, recalls her encounter with horse counter and realizes it been centuries after that time.

6.6 KEY WORDS

- "Tippet" is an old-fashioned shawl or shoulder cape, and this one's made of 'tulle', which is silky and thin like gossamer.
- Immortality means the ability to live forever, eternal life.

6.7 THEMES

BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH THEME OF MORTALITY

Mortality is probably the major theme in this poem. It's all about the speaker's attitude toward her death and what the actual day of her death was like. Dickinson paints a picture of the day that doesn't seem too far from the ordinary (that is, if you're used to having a guy named Death take you out on dates). The speaker isn't scared of death at all, and seems to accept it.

BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH THEME OF IMMORTALITY

That's right, two opposite themes Mortality and Immortality occupy this poem. We find out that the memory of the speaker's death day is being told centuries into the afterlife. So, in this poem, Dickinson explores the idea of perpetual life. In this poem there is life after death, which offers an explanation as to why the speaker's so calm about everything. Death's not the end, just one step closer to eternity.

BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH THEME OF SPIRITUALITY

Well, the speaker is a ghost, which means Dickinson had to believe in some sort of life after death (and we do know that she grew up in a Christian family). But she leaves specific religious references out of the poem, and we don't know if the speaker is recalling the memory of her death from Heaven, Hell, or somewhere else; we only know that it's a place beyond this world.

BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH THEME OF LOVE

The poem doesn't really address love head-on, but it certainly gives us a glimpse into courtship (a.k.a. dating) and romantic love. If you exchange "Tom" or "Joe" for "Death" here, this could be a pretty good example of dating for the 1800s. The speaker's tone in the poem makes the reader believe the speaker does not fear death, but feels the opposite toward it. If the poem did not explore death with an underlying theme of love, the acceptance of death might eventually be hard for the reader to believe.

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6.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. What is the main theme of the poem?
2. What does the speaker personifies in this poem?
3. Who edited this work before publish?
4. Do you believe the speaker's relaxed attitude toward death? Sometimes we pretend to be confident when we're nervous and brave when we're scared. Is this an example of that? Which lines of the poem support your opinion?
5. Why might the speaker not fear death?
6. If Dickinson were writing this today, do you think she could still illustrate the journey to death with as a carriage ride, or would that be silly? What would be a good present-day equivalent?
7. Try reading the poem out loud. How does the sound of the poem affect your reading of it? Think about the action in the poem (the driving, the stopping). When does the sound mimic the action?
8. The speaker seems to speak fondly and clearly of her memory of death. What do you think that means about the afterlife? How do you imagine the place where she now speaks from?

UNIT 7 I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED EMILY DICKINSON

NOTES

Structure

7.0 INTRODUCTION

I taste a liquor never brewed" is a lyrical poem written by Emily Dickinson first published in the *Springfield Daily Republican* of 4 May 1861 from a now lost copy. Although titled "The May-Wine" by the *Republican*, Dickinson never titled the poem so it is commonly referred to by its first line.

7.1 OBJECTIVE

Although titled "The May-Wine" by the Republican, Dickinson never titled the poem so it is commonly referred to by its first line. The poem celebrates Dickinson's intoxication with life in an ironic and transformative manner, drawing on themes of popular temperance reform of the time.

7.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (December 10, 1830 – May 15, 1886) was an American poet. Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, into a prominent family with strong ties to its community. After studying at the Amherst Academy for seven years in her youth, she briefly attended the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary before returning to her family's house in Amherst.

Evidence suggests that Dickinson lived much of her life in isolation. Considered an eccentric by locals, she developed a penchant for white clothing and was known for her reluctance to greet guests or, later in life, to even leave her bedroom. Dickinson never married, and most friendships between her and others depended entirely upon correspondence.

While Dickinson was a prolific poet, fewer than a dozen of her nearly 1,800 poems were published during her lifetime. The poems published then were usually edited significantly to fit conventional poetic rules. Her poems were unique to her era. They contain short lines, typically lack titles, and often use slant rhyme as well as unconventional capitalization and punctuation. Many of her poems deal with themes of death and immortality, two recurring topics in letters to her friends.

Although Dickinson's acquaintances were likely aware of her writing, it was not until after her death in 1886—when Lavinia, Dickinson's younger sister, discovered her cache of poems—that the breadth of her work became public. Her first collection of poetry was published in 1890 by personal acquaintances Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, though both heavily edited the content. A 1998 *New York Times* article revealed that of the many edits made to Dickinson's work, the name "Susan" was often deliberately removed.

At least eleven of Dickinson's poems were dedicated to sister-in-law Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson, though all the dedications were obliterated, presumably by Todd. A complete, and mostly unaltered, collection of her poetry became available for the first time when scholar Thomas H. Johnson published *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* in 1955.

Critical appreciation of the poem

Emily Dickinson-a great American female poet represented the farthest point in the 19^{th} century American Poetry. American poetry in regard to the adventures of the spirit is beautifully reflected in her poetry. She had the distinction of being a pioneer of 19^{th} century American Poetry. She was an anticipator of metaphysical poetry, a smeller of modernity and a defender of romanticism. Conard Alken described her as,

"The most perfect flower of New England-Transcendentalism."

7.3 TEXT

I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED

Emily Dickinson

I taste a liquor never brewed –

From Tankards scooped in Pearl –

Not all the Frankfort Berries

Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of air – am I –

And Debauchee of Dew –

Reeling – thro' endless summer days –
From inns of molten Blue –
When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door –
When Butterflies – renounce their "drams" –
I shall but drink the more!
Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats –
And Saints – to windows run –
To see the little Tippler
From Manzanilla come!

7.4 CRITICAL APPRECIATION

The poem "I taste a Liquor Never Brewed" is one of the most delicate and suggestive Emily's poems in which she presents sublime joy of life and spiritual intoxication. Drunk with the joy of living, she expresses her transport in terms of a cosmic spree. The poem deeply suggests the sensuous elements in Emily's personality.

The poem consists of the sublime range of imagery. It opens with exaggeration about the liquor. Here the poet is drunk with the wine of divine spirit. Hence she does not need ordinary liquor brewed in earthly breweries. The divine liquor she had tasted is better than all the vats upon Rhine. Her wine is not from tankards scooped in pearl.

In the second stanza, in a deeply confessional note, the poet tells us of her addiction of drink and her sensual nature. She is exhilarating and her sensual indulgence is in dew. Tipsy with intoxication the poet reels away her endless summer days. No edicts or edifications can bar the poet from this indulgence, because she drinks not from earthly bars, but from the 'inns of molten blue', meaning heavenly inns. Thus her intoxication is divine. As he

Inebriate of air am I
And debauchee of dew,
Reeling through endless summer
Days from inns of molten-blue.

The poet continues to drink and to enjoy the life, when the landlord turn out the drunken bee from foxgloves in their garden, and when the butterfly drinks to her fill and renounces. Thus it means that 'Bee' and 'Butterfly' have drunk and also satisfied that they don't want to drink more. But the poetess can still drink the draughts of ecstasy.

The poetess continues to drink the divine intoxicant from the inexhaustible vessels of nature, till the saints and angels in heaven grow jubilant to see the 'little tipple leaning against of sun'. Behind this the feeling is ecstatic feeling. It shows forgetting the world and living into a different one almost like that of the paradise. As she says,

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats-

And Saints-to windows run-

To see the little Tippler

Leaning against the-sun.

Here 'leaning against the sun' is an excellent expression of crazy imagination. The ecstasy of divine intoxication is so profound that the poet is transported to the sun when she leans against him.

The poem is influenced by Emerson whose essays Dickinson had as early as in 1849. It seems that Miss Dickinson may be writing here a parody of Emerson's transcendental rendering of poetic inspiration in his poem called 'Bacchus' which begins thus:-

Bring me wine, but wine which never grew

In the belly of the grape…."

Emerson's wine is the plutonian 'flowing' of divine spirit. Drunk with it, Emerson merges with Nature, breaks through convention, annihilates time and spare, and recovers his lost heaven. Miss Dickinson's beery speery lands her in heaven too but in a different.

7.5 SUMMARY

I taste a liquor never brewed is a short lyrical poem written by Emily Dickinson which was first published in the Springfield Daily Republican on 4 May 1861. The publisher changed the title of the poem as 'The May-Wine', but Dickinson herself never titled the poem so it is commonly referred to by its first line.

The "liquor never brewed" has a touch of something unearthly about it. Not all the vats upon the Rhine can produce such drink, because it is scooped in rare pearls. The ingredients of the liquor are extraordinary. In a deeply confessional note, the poet tells us of her addiction to drink and her sensual nature. But the drink she is addicted to is exhilarating air and her sensual indulgence is in the dew. Tipsy with intoxication the poet reels away her endless summer days. No edicts or edifications can bar the poet from this indulgence, because she drinks not from earthly bars, but from the 'inns of molten blue", meaning heavenly inns. Her intoxication, therefore, is divine. The stanza has unusual and fresh images which are not "the worn out counters of expression."

NOTES

When the landlords turn out the drunken bee from foxgloves in their gardens, and when the butterfly drinks to her fill and renounces, the poet can still drink the draughts of ecstasy. The poet continues to drink the divine intoxicant from the inexhaustible vessel of nature, till the saints and angels in heaven grow jubilant to see the "little tippler leaning against the sun. The ecstasy of divine intoxication is so profound that the poet is transported to the sun when she leans against him.

The theme of the poem is indirectly presented through images, metaphors and symbols. The poet speaks of her inebriety (drunkenness). The "liquor never brewed" that she tastes does not belong to this world, but to her world of sensuous imagination. She drinks to the less the exhilarating aspects of nature. The artist is intoxicated with divine madness. The "little Tippler" in the poem is Emily Dickinson, who drinks in ecstasy "from the inns of molten blue", with saints and angels. The poet, through fresh and unusual images, makes us share her ecstasy. It was a reeling triumph to be a secret drinker while in the name of Orthodox religion one can close the bars of Amberst, but not the "inns of molten blue" where she drank with saints and was served by angles.

7.6 THEMES

I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED THEME OF MAN AND THE NATURAL WORLD

Nature is the real star of "I taste a liquor never brewed," no matter how many times Dickinson reminds us of her (nonexistent) drinking habit. Ultimately, the poem is an extended metaphor for the beauty of nature. If this poem were a musical, the whole thing would probably just look a lot like the scene in *The Sound of Music* where Maria sings "The Hills Are Alive". True, sweeping shots of mountains swirling around and around might get dull on a loop (not to mention give us terrible motion sickness), but Dickinson wants us to do more than just run around in the mountains singing. The poem shows us that we are somewhat separate from nature because we can break the rules that govern "natural" things like bees and butterflies, but we are still a part of the bigger picture and can still be deeply affected by the natural world. Dickinson wants us to *connect* with nature, not just look at it.

I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED THEME OF DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

We have to admit that the drug and alcohol content in "I taste a liquor never brewed" is pretty light. However, what Dickinson has to say about inebriation is still important. She seems to be saying that the drunkenness that comes from alcohol is man-made and artificial. Though it's pleasant in some ways, it just can't compare to what can be found out in nature because what we have in nature has been given to us by the greatest bartender of all time: God. As indicated by the final stanza, it

pleases those higher beings to see us revel in the natural beauty of the world around us, and thus, by extension, it probably pleases the "big guy" as well.

I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED THEME OF AWE AND AMAZEMENT

"I taste a liquor never brewed" is not about simple admiration, it is expressing sheer awe at the wonder that is nature. Nature's beauty is so powerful that it can inebriate us if we allow it to, and the speaker in the poem has definitely allowed it. Though we know that Dickinson is a fan of nature and writing poems about it, this one is so over the top that it makes the reader question whether she's poking just a little bit of fun at those who were just a wee bit more stodgy—we're looking at you, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED THEME OF SOCIETY AND CLASS

Dickinson was from an influential, upper middle-class family and experienced quite a bit of privilege in her life. We're not saying she was a snob or anything, but the influences of her social status come through in "I taste a liquor never brewed" whether it was intentional or not. Though the upper classes were certainly not shy about enjoying an alcoholic beverage or two at gatherings, outright drunkenness was not considered socially appropriate. Being drunk, especially in public, was a very lower-class thing to do, and Dickinson's choice of words and symbols to represent inebriation also shows this socially-influenced opinion.

7.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. How does Dickinson's use of unconventional capitalization affect the poem?
2. What impact do the editorial changes mentioned in the first and last stanzas have on the overall meaning and sound of the poem?
3. Dickinson includes some very specific details in this poem, such as the Frankfort Berries, Manzanilla, and even Seraphs. Do you feel that these specific details enhance the imagery of the poem, or do they take away from it? Why?
4. In comparison to many other poets of her time, as well as much of her own work, this poem is pretty light stuff. How seriously do you think Dickinson is taking herself in this poem? Do you think she may have even been using this to poke fun at other more stern poets who were writing about spiritual ecstasy, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and his poem "Bacchus"?
5. How does the playful tone and slightly racy topic of the poem fit into the standard representation of Dickinson as a recluse and a bit of a stick-in-the-mud?

UNIT 8 THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER MARK TWAIN

NOTES

Structure

8.0 INTRODUCTION

"Mending Wall" (1915) is Robert Frost's tribute to one man's notion of being a good neighbor, even as that notion is the opposite of his own. It is the opening poem in Robert Frost's second collection of poetry, *North of Boston* (1915). Homesick for America, Frost wrote "Mending Wall" while living in England with his wife and four children before World War I. Napoleon Guay had been Frost's neighbor in New Hampshire a few years earlier and inspired the poem, "Mending Wall." Apparently, French-Canadian Guay made an impression on Frost by often repeating the phrase, "Good Fences make Good Neighbors," during the routine repairs on the wall between their farms.

The idea of "good fences" is one of personal boundaries, evoking the American pioneer mentality of staking a claim and taking ownership. With this poem, Frost questions that version of the American dream and hints at another version. After becoming a well-known poet, Frost was eager to reclaim his own space in New Hampshire; "Mending Wall" illustrates the personal and natural freedoms, as well as limitations, of a rural existence. The poem questions the necessity of a wall, like questioning the wisdom of perpetuating an old habit. In America, a land of vast frontier, do we need walls to maintain relationships with others? This question becomes even more interesting in light of Frost's later position as American "goodwill ambassador" to South America, and later to the Soviet Union during President Kennedy's administration. In light of his interest in the dilemma of borders in "Mending Wall," it is fitting that he would reach across them to foster positive relations with other people and cultures.

As America's Poet, Frost received a multitude of awards and distinctions, including four Pulitzer Prizes. Though popular with the public, Frost did not

participate in the modernistic, free-verse experiments of his fellow poets. He preferred to convey his thematic messages through meter, rhyme, and form. The U.S. Senate passed a resolution dedicated to Frost on his seventy-fifth birthday, declaring that "His poems have helped to guide American thought and humor and wisdom, setting forth to our minds a reliable representation of ourselves and of all men."

8.1 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born Robert Lee Frost in San Francisco on March 26, 1874, Frost began writing poetry in high school. He married his co-valedictorian, Elinor White, in 1895, after dropping out of Dartmouth College. While trying to establish a career as a poet, Frost worked as a newspaper editor, cobbler, and farmer, and even attended Harvard for a time. Those years were lean for Frost and his family, but in 1906, he took a job as a teacher, which supported him as he composed most of the poems in his first book, *A Boy's Will*. After a stint living in England and a second book of poetry, *North of Boston* (1915), which contained "Mending Wall," Frost returned to America where he received critical acclaim for his poetry and four Pulitzer Prizes between 1922 and 1942.

In 1912, having been unable to interest American publishers in his poems, Frost moved his family to a farm in Buckinghamshire, England, where he wrote prolifically, attempting to perfect his distinct poetic voice. During this time, he met such literary figures as Ezra Pound, an American expatriate poet and champion of innovative literary approaches, and Edward Thomas, a young English poet associated with the Georgian poetry movement then popular in Great Britain. Frost soon published his first book of poetry, *A Boy's Will* (1913), which received appreciative reviews. Following the success of the book, Frost relocated to Gloucestershire, England, and directed publication of a second collection, *North of Boston* (1914). This volume contains several of his most frequently anthologized pieces, including "Mending Wall," "The Death of the Hired Man," and "After Apple-Picking." Shortly after *North of Boston* was published in Great Britain, the Frost family returned to the United States, settling in Franconia, New Hampshire.

The American editions of Frost's first two volumes won critical acclaim upon publication in the United States, and in 1917 Frost began his affiliations with several American universities as a professor of literature and poet-in-residence. Frost continued to write prolifically over the years and received numerous literary awards as well as honors from the U.S. government and American universities. He recited his work at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and represented the United States on several official missions. Though he received great popular acclaim, his critical reputation waned during the latter part of his career. His final three collections received less enthusiastic reviews, yet they contain several pieces acknowledged as among his greatest achievements. He died in Boston in 1963.

8.2 TEXT

NOTES

MENDING WALL

Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:

"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walking in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there,
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

8.3 SUMMARY

A stone wall separates the speaker's property from his neighbor's. In spring, the two meet to walk the wall and jointly make repairs. The speaker sees no reason for the wall to be kept there are no cows to be contained, just apple and pine trees. He does not believe in walls for the sake of walls. The neighbor resorts to an old adage: "Good fences make good neighbors." The speaker remains unconvinced and mischievously presses the neighbor to look beyond the old-fashioned folly of such reasoning. His neighbor will not be swayed. The speaker envisions his neighbor as a holdover from a justifiably outmoded era, a living example of a dark-age mentality. But the neighbor simply repeats the adage.

Blank verse is the baseline meter of this poem, but few of the lines march along in blank verse's characteristic lock-step iambs, five abreast. Frost maintains five stressed syllables per line, but he varies the feet extensively to sustain the natural speech-like quality of the verse. There are no stanza breaks, obvious end-rhymes, or rhyming patterns, but many of the end-words share an assonance (e.g., wall, hill, balls, wall, and well sun, thing, stone, mean, line, and again or game, them, and him twice). Internal rhymes, too, are subtle, slanted, and conceivably coincidental. The vocabulary is all of a piece no fancy words, all short (only one word, another, is of three syllables), all conversational and this is perhaps why the words resonate so consummately with each other in sound and feel.

NOTES

I have a friend who, as a young girl, had to memorize this poem as punishment for some now-forgotten misbehavior. Forced memorization is never pleasant; still, this is a fine poem for recital. "Mending Wall" is sonorous, homey, wry arch, even yet serene; it is steeped in levels of meaning implied by its well-wrought metaphoric suggestions. These implications inspire numerous interpretations and make definitive readings suspect. Here are but a few things to think about as you reread the poem.

The image at the heart of "Mending Wall" is arresting: two men meeting on terms of civility and neighborliness to build a barrier between them. They do so out of tradition, out of habit. Yet the very earth conspires against them and makes their task Sisyphean. Sisyphus, you may recall, is the figure in Greek mythology condemned perpetually to push a boulder up a hill, only to have the boulder roll down again. These men push boulders back on top of the wall; yet just as inevitably, whether at the hand of hunters or sprites, or the frost and thaw of nature's invisible hand, the boulders tumble down again. Still, the neighbors persist. The poem, thus, seems to meditate conventionally on three grand themes: barrier-building (segregation, in the broadest sense of the word), the doomed nature of this enterprise, and our persistence in this activity regardless.

But, as we so often see when we look closely at Frost's best poems, what begins in folksy straightforwardness ends in complex ambiguity. The speaker would have us believe that there are two types of people: those who stubbornly insist on building superfluous walls (with clichés as their justification) and those who would dispense with this practice wall-builders and wall-breakers. But are these impulses so easily separable? And what does the poem really say about the necessity of boundaries?

The speaker may scorn his neighbor's obstinate wall-building, may observe the activity with humorous detachment, but he himself goes to the wall at all times of the year to mend the damage done by hunters; it is the speaker who contacts the neighbor at wall-mending time to set the annual appointment. Which person, then, is the real wall-builder? The speaker says he sees no need for a wall here, but this implies that there may be a need for a wall elsewhere "where there are cows," for example. Yet the speaker must derive something, some use, some satisfaction, out of the exercise of wall-building, or why would he initiate it here? There is something in him that does love a wall, or at least the act of making a wall.

This wall-building act seems ancient, for it is described in ritual terms. It involves "spells" to counteract the "elves," and the neighbor appears a Stone-Age savage while he hoists and transports a boulder. Well, wall-building is ancient and enduring the building of the first walls, both literal and figurative, marked the very foundation of society. Unless you are an absolute anarchist and do not mind livestock munching your lettuce, you probably recognize the need for literal boundaries. Figuratively, rules and laws are walls; justice is the process of wall-mending. The ritual of wall maintenance highlights the dual and complementary nature of human society: The rights of the individual (property boundaries, proper boundaries) are

affirmed through the affirmation of other individuals' rights. And it demonstrates another benefit of community; for this communal act, this civic "game," offers a good excuse for the speaker to interact with his neighbor. Wall-building is social, both in the sense of "societal" and "sociable." What seems an act of anti-social self-confinement can, thus, ironically, be interpreted as a great social gesture. Perhaps the speaker does believe that good fences make good neighbors for again, it is he who initiates the wall-mending.

Of course, a little bit of mutual trust, communication, and goodwill would seem to achieve the same purpose between well-disposed neighbors at least where there are no cows. And the poem says it twice: "something there is that does not love a wall." There is some intent and value in wall-breaking, and there is some powerful tendency toward this destruction. Can it be simply that wall-breaking creates the conditions that facilitate wall-building? Are the groundswells a call to community- building nature's nudge toward concerted action? Or are they benevolent forces urging the demolition of traditional, small-minded boundaries? The poem does not resolve this question, and the narrator, who speaks for the groundswells but acts as a fence-builder, remains a contradiction.

Many of Frost's poems can be reasonably interpreted as commenting on the creative process; "Mending Wall" is no exception. On the basic level, we can find here a discussion of the construction-disruption duality of creativity. Creation is a positive act a mending or a building. Even the most destructive-seeming creativity results in a change, the building of some new state of being: If you tear down an edifice, you create a new view for the folks living in the house across the way. Yet creation is also disruptive: If nothing else, it disrupts the status quo. Stated another way, disruption is creative: It is the impetus that leads directly, mysteriously (as with the groundswells), to creation. Does the stone wall embody this duality? In any case, there is something about "walking the line" and building it, mending it, balancing each stone with equal parts skill and spell that evokes the mysterious and laborious act of making poetry.

On a level more specific to the author, the question of boundaries and their worth is directly applicable to Frost's poetry. Barriers confine, but for some people they also encourage freedom and productivity by offering challenging frameworks within which to work. On principle, Frost did not write free verse. His creative process involved engaging poetic form (the rules, tradition, and boundaries the walls of the poetic world) and making it distinctly his own. By maintaining the tradition of formal poetry in unique ways, he was simultaneously a mender and breaker of walls.

8.4 CRITICAL APPRICIATION

The wall is introduced as a primary symbol in the poem. Whatever it is that protests against it, however, are vague and perhaps unnamable. This something is powerful,

though, since it can create "gaps even two can pass abreast." Presumably, the speaker and his neighbor could step together from one side of the fence to the other, but they don't consider doing that. The speaker contrasts the natural, yet almost secret, destruction of the wall by a "ground-swell" with the intentional destruction created by hunters. The speaker recognizes and understands their motive. The speaker reinforces the idea that these breaks created by nature are more mysterious than those made by the hunters. This action cannot be observed, though the effects are consistent year after year. The speaker's ambivalence becomes apparent.

Although he will attempt to present the desire for walls as belonging solely to his neighbor, he is the one who arranges to repair the wall. The separation between the two is emphasized in these lines, as they walk on opposite sides of the wall and as they are each responsible for replacing the stones that have fallen on each one's side. While they are performing this act together, they do not actually assist each other. The tone becomes a bit more playful in these lines, as the farmers attempt to cast a "spell" on the stones. This idea will be reinforced later when the speaker thinks about "elves." Although the speaker wants to present this activity as insignificant, as "just another ... game," he also reveals that the task has its difficult physical aspects. The poem which occurs near the center of the poem and explicitly illustrates the poem's central tension, the speaker attempts to present him as desiring a closer relationship with his neighbor.

He does this with a joke that is founded on a practical observation. Because farmers often use fences to keep their livestock separated, this fence should be unnecessary pine trees and apple trees will not become confused with each other, nor will one eat the fruit or seeds of the other. The neighbor speaks for himself; he presents himself directly rather than through the eyes of the speaker. His personality is conveyed in this one line, which will be repeated later, but which is the only thought we receive from the neighbor. Rather than respond to the speaker's practical observation, the neighbor responds more abstractly, with a metaphor. Sometimes, he seems to suggest, the characteristics of our physical relationships directly influence our emotional relationships. Although he never states what he believes constitutes a good neighbor, he implies that some clear separation is essential. Again, the speaker considers trying to provoke his neighbor with practical objections, but he never makes this statement out loud.

The speaker also begins to speculate abstractly, and the symbolic significance of the wall becomes apparent as he uses the phrase "walling in" and "walling out." The double function of a wall is addressed, for not only are outsiders prevented from entry, but insiders are trapped inside. The speaker considers the possibility that walls "give offence" as he himself seems to be slightly offended, but he never reaches a conclusion about what it is within himself that is either walled in or walled out. Nor does he say that he himself doesn't love a wall only that "Something" doesn't. We are meant to assume that the "something" is internal to the speaker, but his refusal to clearly acknowledge this attitude conveys his own ambivalence.

NOTES

The speaker again reveals his ambivalent attitude. He thinks about being playful, suggesting that "Elves" destroyed their wall, but he also longs for the neighbor to be playful, and besides, the speaker can't be entirely playful himself; he knows "it's not elves exactly."

The speaker presents his neighbor as more mysterious and primitive than himself, relying on a simile to convey his observation: "like an old-stone savage armed." This simile is appropriate because the farmers are literally using stones as their tools, but stone tools have the connotation of "savage."

He implies that the neighbor is also using the stones as weapons; he is "armed." In a sense, then, the fence becomes a weapon, even if its purpose is primarily defense. The speaker then moves from thoughts of the Stone Age to thoughts of the Dark Ages, where darkness functions as a symbol for a lack of insight that is understood as progress. His darkness is more than literal, more than the shade provided by the trees, but also emotional in his refusal to become connected. The speaker indicates that the neighbor will not take a risk, because he will not reveal the reasons for his attitude beyond the fact that it reflects his father's attitude. Because the line "Good fences make good neighbors" has been repeated, and because it forms the last line of the poem, it becomes highly significant. The reader will remember it as the speaker remembers it, and perhaps the reader will have to puzzle out its meaning as the speaker attempts to do.

8.5 THEMES

ALIENATION AND LONELINESS

Using the poem's central image of the stone wall, the speaker explores the reasons why people create boundaries around themselves.

He believes that that building a wall can "give offense," or alienate one's neighbor. Frost portrays the speaker and his neighbor as friendly with each other and able to work together, but essentially alienated from one another. The speaker does not see the necessity of maintaining the wall, apart from the fun of getting together to fix it; his neighbor, however, insists upon repairing it, because the ritual of repair is a tradition. The poem's opening line "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" implies that walls are unnatural, and that the vague "Something" is a force of nature that destroys the walls people build.

This force seems not to want people to be separated from one another and breaks apart the wall: it "sends the frozen-ground-swell under it / and spills the upper boulders in the sun." Going against this natural force, the speaker and his neighbor will never truly know each other: as the speaker says, "We keep the wall between us as we go." Even as the two men are separated by the physical presence of the wall, they also alienate each other with their contrasting attitudes toward the wall, which illustrate a difference in their views toward life in general. While the

speaker is imaginative and able to play with the image of the wall, his neighbor is unoriginal and can only repeat his own father's words about the wall: "'Good fences make good neighbors.'" To the speaker, the neighbor seems "like an old-stone savage" who "moves in darkness" a primitive man who does not think or question. Nevertheless, the joint activity of repairing the wall does "'make good neighbors'" in the sense that it brings them together in a shared activity.

CUSTOM AND TRADITION

The speaker and his neighbor have a custom "at spring mending-time" of meeting at the wall that divides their properties "to walk the line / and set the wall between us once again." The speaker initiates this activity each year and enjoys it in a playful way: the wall's restoration is "just another kind of outdoor game, / One on a side. It comes to little more" than this for him. Yet he questions the wall's usefulness, seeing no real need for it: "My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines." Although the speaker is able to challenge tradition, his neighbor cannot break away from the custom of maintaining fences between properties. Cherishing a tradition his father once carried out, the neighbor will not question the need for the wall. Unoriginal and unthinking in the speaker's eyes, the neighbor "moves in darkness," the darkness of blindly following custom without considering why he does so. The speaker points out that his neighbor "will not go behind his father's saying ... 'Good fences make good neighbors.'" He tries to tease his neighbor into looking below the surface of his father's words to ask why good fences make good neighbors, but the neighbor prefers simply to follow tradition for its own sake.

CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION

The speaker's spirited imagination enables him to animate the natural world and have fun with the tedious job of repairing a stone wall while his duller neighbor can only see that the wall needs repair. The neighbor is unimaginative: he does not think too deeply about why he is repairing the wall and is only able to repeat his father's words, "'Good fences make good neighbors.'" While the neighbor views walls as necessary dividers of property, the speaker questions the usefulness of walls and contemplates their various meanings. He presents the "Something ... that doesn't love a wall" as mysterious and whimsical: for instance, the "something" could be "'elves,'" but "it's not elves exactly." The speaker sees the stones from the wall as "loaves" and "balls," objects of domesticity and play, and he says that the ritual of fixing the wall is "just another kind of outdoor game, / One on a side." He does not take this job of mending the wall too seriously, claiming that he and his neighbor "have to use a spell to make [the stones] balance: 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'" Mischievously, the speaker tells his neighbor that "My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines," but the neighbor does not appreciate the humor in this remark. The contrast between the speaker's imaginative view of the world and his neighbor's duty-bound view helps to build the poem's theme of alienation.

ORDER AND DISORDER

The annual ritual of meeting to repair the stone wall dividing their properties represents the speaker and his neighbor's attempt to reestablish order in a disorderly world. The mildly named "Something that doesn't love a wall" is a powerful force of nature that is able to move boulders and destroy human handiwork. The fact that the wall-mending ritual is an annual event speaks of the futility of this activity: each spring, the two men fix the wall, and each winter "Something" breaks it apart again.

8.6 STYLE

"Mending Wall" is written in unrhymed iambic pentameter, or blank verse, a popular form in English. An iamb is a metrical foot containing two syllables, the first of which is unstressed and the second of which is stressed. In iambic pentameter, then, each line will consist of ten syllables.

Like many of Robert Frost's poems, "Mending Wall" has received significant attention from critics who refuse to agree with one another regarding its interpretation and meaning. Although most critics recognize the motif of separation and connection as typical of Frost, they disagree vehemently about the overall success of the poem. In his book Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist, John C. Kemp claims that the speaker in this poem illustrates Frost's "characteristic role as an outsider who is both disturbed and fascinated by an environment he can neither change nor fully accept." A. Zverev, in an article published in 20th Century American Literature: A Soviet View, describes the metaphor of the wall as "a rich image which serves to convey notions of true and false in the mind of the people." Zverev believes that the strength of the poem lies in its attention to exact detail and, especially, in its ability to convey the resistance many people feel to separation.

8.7 FURTHER READINGS

Investigate the status of family farms in the United States today. Where are family farmers concentrated geographically, and how large are their farms on average, in terms of acreage and income?

Look at the work of other major poets who were Frost's contemporaries in 1914: Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, Carl Sandburg. How do their subject matters and styles compare with Frost's? Can you account for Frost's wider popularity with the reading audience?

From 1912 to 1914, Frost took his family with him to live in England. It was during this time that he wrote the poems published in North of Boston, including

"Mending Wall." What major social and political issues were being faced in England and Europe during these years that Americans did not have to confront?

Consider the neighbor's repeated statement in "Mending Wall": '"Good fences make good neighbors.'" Why does the neighbor think good fences make good neighbors? How does the poem show us that good fences can make good neighbors in other ways?

NOTES

UNIT 9 ROAD NOT TAKEN - ROBERT FROST

NOTES

Structure

9.0 INTRODUCTION

'The Road Not Taken', the road symbolizes our life. The poet says that the path that we don't choose in our life is 'the road not taken'. He describes his feelings about that choice that he had left in the past. The path which we have chosen, decides our future, our destination. The important message that the poet wants to give is that the choice that we make has an impact on our future and if we make a wrong choice, we regret it but cannot go back on it. So, we must be wise while making choices. "The Road Not Taken," first published in Mountain Interval in 1916, is one of Frost's most well-known poems, and its concluding three lines may be his most famous. Like many of Frost's poems, "The Road Not Taken" is set in a rural natural environment which encourages the speaker toward introspection. The poem relies on a metaphor in which the journey through life is compared to a journey on a road. The speaker of the poem must choose one path instead of another. Although the paths look equally attractive, the speaker knows that his choice at this moment may have a significant influence on his future. He does make a decision, hoping that he may be able to visit this place again, yet realizing that such an opportunity is unlikely. He imagines himself in the future telling the story of his life and claiming that his decision to take the road "less traveled by," the road few other people have taken, "has made all the difference."

9.1 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in San Francisco, Frost was eleven years old when his father died, and his family relocated to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where his paternal grandparents lived. In 1892, Frost graduated from Lawrence High School and shared valedictorian honors with Elinor White, whom he married three years later. After

graduation, Frost briefly attended Dartmouth College, taught at grammar schools, worked at a mill, and served as a newspaper reporter. He published a chapbook of poems at his own expense, and contributed the poem "The Birds Do Thus" to the Independent, a New York magazine. In 1897, Frost entered Harvard University as a special student, but left before completing degree requirements because of a bout with tuberculosis and the birth of his second child. Three years later the Frosts' eldest child died, an event which led to marital discord and which, some critics believe, Frost later addressed in his poem "Home Burial."

In 1912, having been unable to interest American publishers in his poems, Frost moved his family to a farm in Buckinghamshire, England, where he wrote prolifically, attempting to perfect his distinct poetic voice. During this time, he met such literary figures as Ezra Pound, an American expatriate poet and champion of innovative literary approaches, and Edward Thomas, a young English poet associated with the Georgian poetry movement then popular in Great Britain. Frost soon published his first book of poetry, A Boy's Will (1913), which received appreciative reviews. Following the success of the book, Frost relocated to Gloucestershire, England, and directed publication of a second collection, North of Boston (1914).

This volume contains several of his most frequently anthologized pieces, including "Mending Wall," "The Death of the Hired Man," and "After Apple-Picking." Shortly after North of Boston was published in Great Britain, the Frost family returned to the United States, settling in Franconia, New Hampshire. The American editions of Frost's first two volumes won critical acclaim upon publication in the United States, and in 1917 Frost began his affiliations with several American universities as a professor of literature and poet-in-residence.

Frost continued to write prolifically over the years and received numerous literary awards as well as honors from the United States government and American universities. He recited his work at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and represented the United States on several official missions. Though he received great popular acclaim, his critical reputation waned during the latter part of his career. His final three collections received less enthusiastic reviews, yet contain several pieces acknowledged as among his greatest achievements. He died in Boston in 1963.

9.2 TEXT

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN
Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

9.3 SUMMARY

In the opening line of the poem Frost introduces the elements of his primary metaphor, the diverging roads. He expresses his regret at his human limitations, that he must make a choice. Yet, the choice is not easy, since "long I stood" before coming to a decision. He examines the path as best he can, but his vision is limited because the path bends and is covered over. These lines indicate that although the speaker would like to acquire more information, he is prevented from doing so because of the nature of his environment.

The speaker seems to indicate that the second path is a more attractive choice because no one has taken it lately. However, he seems to feel ambivalent, since he also describes the path as "just as fair" as the first rather than more fair. Although the poet breaks the stanza after line 10, the central idea continues into the third stanza, creating a structural link between these parts of the poem. Here, the speaker states that the paths are "really about the same." Neither path has been traveled lately. Although he's searching for a clear logical reason to decide on one path over another, that reason is unavailable. The speaker makes his

decision, trying to persuade himself that he will eventually satisfy his desire to travel both paths, but simultaneously admitting that such a hope is unrealistic. Notice the exclamation mark after line 13; such a punctuation mark conveys excitement, but that excitement is quickly undercut by his admission in the following lines. In this stanza, the tone clearly shifts. This is the only stanza which also begins with a new sentence, indicating a stronger break from the previous ideas.

The speaker imagines himself in the future, discussing his life. What he suggests, here, though, appears to contradict what he has said earlier. At the end of the poem, in the future, he will claim that the paths were different from each other and that he courageously did not choose the conventional route. Perhaps he will actually believe this in the future; perhaps he only wishes that he could choose "the one less traveled by."

9.4 CRITICAL APPRECIATION

The speaker stands in the woods, considering a fork in the road. Both ways are equally worn and equally overlaid with un-trodden leaves. The speaker chooses one, telling himself that he will take the other another day. Yet he knows it is unlikely that he will have the opportunity to do so. And he admits that someday in the future he will recreate the scene with a slight twist: He will claim that he took the less-traveled road.

"The Road Not Taken" consists of four stanzas of five lines. The rhyme scheme is ABAAB; the rhymes are strict and masculine, with the notable exception of the last line (we do not usually stress the -enceof difference). There are four stressed syllables per line, varying on an iambic tetrameter base.

This has got to be among the best-known, most-often-misunderstood poems on the planet. Several generations of careless readers have turned it into a piece of Hallmark happy-graduation-son, seize-the-future puffery. Cursed with a perfect marriage of form and content, arresting phrase wrought from simple words, and resonant metaphor, it seems as if "The Road Not Taken" gets memorized without really being read. For this it has died the cliché's un-death of trivial immortality.

But you yourself can resurrect it from zombie-hood by reading it—not with imagination, even, but simply with accuracy. Of the two roads the speaker says "the passing there / Had worn them really about the same." In fact, both roads "that morning lay / In leaves no step had trodden black." Meaning: Neither of the roads is less traveled by. These are the facts; we cannot justifiably ignore the reverberations they send through the easy aphorisms of the last two stanzas.

One of the attractions of the poem is its archetypal dilemma, one that we instantly recognize because each of us encounters it innumerable times, both literally and figuratively. Paths in the woods and forks in roads are ancient and deep-seated metaphors for the lifeline, its crises and decisions. Identical forks, in particular, symbolize for us the nexus of free will and fate: We are free to choose, but we do

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not really know beforehand what we are choosing between. Our route is, thus, determined by an accretion of choice and chance, and it is impossible to separate the two.

This poem does not advice. It does not say, "When you come to a fork in the road, study the footprints and take the road less traveled by" (or even, as Yogi Berra enigmatically quipped, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it"). Frost's focus is more complicated. First, there is no less-traveled road in this poem; it isn't even an option. Next, the poem seems more concerned with the question of how the concrete present (yellow woods, grassy roads covered in fallen leaves) will look from a future vantage point.

The ironic tone is inescapable: "I shall be telling this with a sigh / somewhere ages and ages hence." The speaker anticipates his own future insincerity—his need, later on in life, to rearrange the facts and inject a dose of Lone Ranger into the account. He knows that he will be inaccurate, at best, or hypocritical, at worst, when he holds his life up as an example. In fact, he predicts that his future self-will betray this moment of decision as if the betrayal were inevitable. This realization is ironic and poignantly pathetic. But the "sigh" is critical. The speaker will not, in his old age, merely gather the youth about him and say, "Do what I did, kiddies. I stuck to my guns, took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." Rather, he may say this, but he will sigh first; for he won't believe it himself. Somewhere in the back of his mind will remain the image of yellow woods and two equally leafy paths.

Ironic as it is, this is also a poem infused with the anticipation of remorse. Its title is not "The Road Less Traveled" but "The Road Not Taken." Even as he makes a choice (a choice he is forced to make if does not want to stand forever in the woods, one for which he has no real guide or definitive basis for decision-making), the speaker knows that he will second-guess himself somewhere down the line or at the very least he will wonder at what is irrevocably lost: the impossible, unknowable Other Path. But the nature of the decision is such that there is no Right Path just the chosen path and the other path. What are sighed for ages and ages hence are not so much the wrong decisions as the moments of decision themselves moments that, one atop the other, mark the passing of a life. This is the more primal strain of remorse.

Thus, to add a further level of irony, the theme of the poem may, after all, be "seize the day." But a more nuanced carpe diem, if you please.

9.5 THEMES

INDIVIDUALISM

On the surface, "The Road Not Taken" seems to be encouraging the reader to follow the road "less travelled by" in life, a not-very-subtle metaphor for living life as a loner and choosing independence for its own sake when all other considerations

come up equal. There is some evidence that makes this interpretation reasonable. The central situation is that one has to choose one road or the other without compromise—an absolutist situation that resembles the way that moral dilemmas are often phrased. Since there is really no distinction made between the roads except that one has been travelled on more than the other that would be the only basis on which to make a choice. The tone of this poem is another indicator that an important decision is being made, with careful, deliberate concentration. Since so much is being put into the choice and the less travelled road is the one chosen, it is reasonable for the reader to assume that this is what the message is supposed to be.

The poem's speaker, though, is not certain that individuality is the right path to take. The less travelled road is said to only "perhaps" have a better claim. Much is made about how slight the differences between the paths are (particularly in lines 9-19), and the speaker expects that when he looks back on this choice with the benefit of increased knowledge, he will sigh. If this is a testament to individuality, it is a pretty flimsy one. This speaker does not celebrate individualism, but accepts it.

CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES

The road that forks into two different directions always presents a choice to be made, in life as well as in poetry. The speaker of this poem is not pleased about having to make this choice and says that he would like to travel both roads. This is impossible, of course, if the speaker is going to be "one traveler": this raises the philosophical question of identity. What the poem implies, but does not state directly, is that the most important factor to consider when making a choice is that the course of action chosen should fit in with the decisions that one has made in the past.

This speaker is distressed about being faced with two paths that lead in different directions because the wrong choice will lead to a lack of integrity. If there were no such thing as free will, the problem would not be about which choice to make: the decision would make itself. In the vision of another writer, this is exactly what would happen. Another writer, faced with the same two roads, would know without a second thought which one to follow. The speaker of "The Road Not Taken" is aware of the implications of choosing badly and does not see enough difference between the two roads to make one stand out as the obvious choice. But it is the nature of life that choosing cannot be avoided.

The only way to approach such a dilemma, the poem implies, is to study all of the details until something makes one direction more important than the other. The difference may be small, nearly unnoticeable, but it will be there. In this case, the speaker of the poem considers both sides carefully and is open to anything that can make a difference. From the middle of the first stanza to the end of the third, physical characteristics are examined. For the most part, the roads are found to be the same: "just as fair" in line 6; "really about the same" in line 10; "both ...

equally lay" in line 11. The one difference is that one has been overgrown with grass from not being used, and, on that basis, the narrator follows it. There is no indication that this slight distinction is the sign that the speaker was looking for or that he feels that the right choice has been made. On the contrary, the speaker thinks that his choice may look like the wrong decision "ages and ages hence." It would not be right, therefore, to say that choosing this particular road was the most important thing, but it is the fact that a choice has been made at all "that has made all the difference."

9.6 STYLE

"The Road Not Taken" is arranged into four stanzas of five lines each. Its rhyme scheme is abaab, which means that the first line in each stanza rhymes with the third and fourth lines, while the second line rhymes with the fifth line. Most of the lines are written in a loose or interrupted iambic meter. An iambic foot contains two syllables, an unstressed one followed by a stressed one. Because most of the lines contain nine syllables, however, the poem cannot be strictly iambic. Often, the extra syllable will be unstressed and will occur near the caesura, or pause, within the line.

9.7 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The War: The symbolism of the two roads in this poem can be applied to any number of circumstances in life, and therefore we cannot identify any one particular meaning as the one that Frost had in mind. It is interesting to note, though, that in 1916,

9.8 FURTHER READINGS

Give a detailed description of what the speaker will see on the less travelled road, bearing in mind that every object you mention will be considered symbolic for something in life.

Many readers never realize that Frost wrote this poem as a parody of an indecisive friend. Choose one character trait of one of your friends and write a poem about it. Do not mention the character trait directly in your poem, but show someone acting it out.

Why does the speaker say, "I shall tell this with a sigh"? Is this a sigh of relief? of frustration? Explain.

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BLOCK - III
FICTION

UNIT 10 THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER -MARK TWAIN

Structure

10.0 INTRODUCTION

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain is an 1876 novel about a young boy growing up along the Mississippi River. It is set in the 1840s in the fictional town of St. Petersburg, inspired by Hannibal, Missouri, where Twain lived as a boy. In the novel Tom Sawyer has several adventures, often with his friend Huckleberry Finn. Originally a commercial failure, the book ended up being the bestselling of any of Twain's works during his lifetime.

Though overshadowed by its sequel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the book is by many considered a masterpiece of American literature, and was one of the first novels to be written on a typewriter. With the publishing of the Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Mark Twain introduced the two immortal characters of Tom and Huckleberry to the "Hall of Fame" of American literature, as well as re-invented the traditional frontier tale. Written around 1870, the novel initially began as a series of letters from Twain to an old friend (Letters to Will Bowen) about their boyhood pranks, schooldays, and childhood mischief. It is supposed that Twain completed the work of Americana rather quickly, at the rate of 50 pages per day.

10.1 OBJECTIVE

The novel describes the youthful adventures of the young protagonist, who embodies the ideal of American youth during the frontier era that preceded Industrialization. Tom Sawyer is considered among one of the greatest pieces of American fiction, particularly with Twain's exceptional ability to capture the "idylls of boyhood" with such vivid and dramatic detail.

10.2 AUTHOR INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain (a.k.a., Samuel Longhorn Clemens) was born in the little town of Florida, Missouri, on November 30, 1835, shortly after his family had moved there from Tennessee. When Twain was about four, his family moved again, this time to Hannibal, Missouri, a small town of about five hundred people.

Twain's father was a lawyer by profession but was only mildly successful. He was, however, highly intelligent and a stern disciplinarian. Twain's mother, a southern belle in her youth, had a natural sense of humor, was emotional, and was known to be particularly fond of animals and unfortunate human beings. Although the family was not wealthy, Twain apparently had a happy and secure childhood.

Twain's father died when Twain was twelve years old and, for the next ten years, Twain was an apprentice printer and then a printer both in Hannibal and in New York City. Hoping to find his fortune, he conceived a wild scheme of making a fortune in South America. On a riverboat to New Orleans, he met a famous riverboat pilot who promised to teach him the trade for five hundred dollars. After completing his training, Twain piloted riverboats along the Mississippi for four years. During this time, he became familiar with the towns along the mighty River and became acquainted with the characters that would later inhabit many of his novels, especially *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn.*

When the Civil War began, Twain's allegiance tended to be Southern due to his Southern heritage, and he briefly served in the Confederate militia. Twain's brother Orion convinced him to go west on an expedition, a trip which became the subject matter of a later work, *Roughing It*.

Even though some of his letters and accounts of traveling had been published, Twain actually launched his literary career with the short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," published in 1865. This story brought him national attention, and Twain devoted the major portion of the rest of his life to literary endeavors. In addition to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, some of Twain's most popular and widely read works include novels such as *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), as well as collections of short stories and essays, such as *The 1,000,000 Bank-Note and Other Stories* (1893), *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg and Other Essays* (1900), and

What Is Man? (1906). Mark Twain, one of America's first and foremost realists and humanists, was born in 1835 during the appearance of Haley's Comet, and he died during the next appearance of Haley's Comet, 75 years later.

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10.3 CHARACTERS

TOM SAWYER

Tom is the young protagonist of the novel. Living with his aunt St. Petersburg, Missouri, Tom has a penchant for adventure and "showing off." Constantly getting into mischief, he plays hooky from school and would rather go swimming than tend to his Sunday school lessons. Blessed with an active imagination, Tom dreams to be a noble robber such as Robin Hood or a pirate. Hungry for attention, Tom is obsessed with appearing noble and obtaining the envy of his peers. However, Tom is extremely clever and possesses an incredible insight on human nature. Throughout the novel, Tom must learn to listen to his conscience and become accountable for his actions.

HUCKLEBERRY FINN

He is a town's social pariah. Son of an abusive and drunkard father who left town, Huck has failed to have been raised with any parental guidance or authority figures. Because he can smoke a pipe and never has to attend church or school, he is the envy of every schoolboy and the nightmare of every mother in town. Huck and Tom often have adventures and both believe in various superstitions. Although disregarded by the "sociable," Huck possesses a kind spirit and consideration for others.

AUNT POLLY

Tom's somewhat elderly aunt and guardian. Religious, simple-mannered, and kind-hearted, Aunt Polly is respected among the citizens of St. Petersburg. Responsible for Tom's discipline and upbringing, Aunt Polly is constantly torn between expressing her exasperation and showing her lover for Tom. Every time he causes trouble, another hair on her head turns gray; she often wishes Tom would behave properly like his brother, Sid.

SID SAWYER

Tom's younger half-brother. Always trying to tattle on Tom, Sid keeps a close on eye his brother's wrongdoings. A goody-two-shoes, he is a punctual and studious pupil.

MARY

Tom's older cousin who resides with Aunt Polly. Mary is depicted as a sweet and good-hearted young lady who sees the good qualities in Tom's character. Religious and pious, Mary was an exceptional student - the opposite of Tom.

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BECKY THATCHER

The daughter of Judge Thatcher. Becky is Tom's age and has recently moved into town. Prim and proper, Becky is the opposite of Tom: she has never been in trouble and is used to obeying her mother's words. With blonde hair and dressy frocks, she quickly wins Tom's affection and attention.

JUDGE THATCHER

Becky's father. A proud and well-respected man of justice, whose family has recently moved into town.

MRS. THATCHER

Becky's mother, wife of the Judge.

INJUN JOE

The antagonist of the novel. Guilty of several murders, Injun Joe possess a violent temperament is set on seeking revenge on those who have treated him harshly in the past. He attempts to frame Muff Potter for one of his own crimes and is pursued by the village authorities.

MUFF POTTER

The town drunk who is framed for the murder of Dr. Robinson. Although his kind nature and drunken state make him harmless, Potter is persecuted by the entire town that believes that he is a murderer.

MR. JONES/OLD WELSHMAN

The old Welshman who lives with his two strong sons in the vicinity of Widow Douglas's house. With Huck's help, the Welshman is able to come to the widow's aide.

WIDOW DOUGLAS

A rich, upper-class widow. With a kind spirit and a devotion to the Christian faith, the widow Douglas is known for her open hospitality and good nature. She also appears as a major character in Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

DR. ROBINSON

The young doctor, guilty of grave robbing, whose murder instigates the chaotic happenings in St. Petersburg.

JOE HARPER

Tom's bosom friend. One of Tom's "gang" of pirates, Joe accompanies Tom on some of his adventures.

MRS. HARPER

Joe's mother

AMY LAWRENCE

Tom Sawyer's former girlfriend, whom he occasionally flirts with and was previously "engaged" to.

ALFRED TEMPLE

A well-dressed boy whom Tom thinks is snobby. Alfred also vies for Becky Thatcher's attention.

MR. DOBBINS

The schoolmaster. Hated by all the children, Mr. Dobbins is depicted as a stern and pathetic man who uses lashings as a method of discipline.

MR. WALTER

The Sunday School Superintendent who issues Bibles to the top students.

MR. SPRAGUE

The long-winded minister.

BEN ROGERS

A young boy who is Tom's friend.

10.4 SUMMARY

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer revolves around the youthful adventures of the novel's schoolboy protagonist, Thomas Sawyer, whose reputation precedes him for causing mischief and strife. Tom lives with his Aunt Polly, half-brother Sid, and Cousin Mary in the quaint town of St. Petersburg, just off the shore of the Mississippi River. St. Petersburg is described as a typical small-town atmosphere where the Christian faith is predominant, the social network is close-knit, and familiarity resides.

Unlike his brother Sid, Tom receives "lickings" from his Aunt Polly; ever the mischief-maker, would rather play hooky than attend school and often sneaks out his bedroom window at night to adventure with his friend, Huckleberry Finn - the town's social outcast. Tom, despite his dread of schooling, is extremely clever and would normally get away with his pranks if Sid were not such a "tattle-tale."

As punishment for skipping school to go swimming, Aunt Polly assigns Tom the chore of whitewashing the fence surrounding the house. In a brilliant scheme, Tom is able to con the neighborhood boys into completing the chore for him, managing to convince them of the joys of whitewashing. At school, Tom is equally

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as flamboyant, and attracts attention by chasing other boys, yelling, and running around. With his usual antics, Tom attempts to catch the eye of one girl in particular: Becky Thatcher, the Judge's daughter. When he first sees her, Tom immediately falls in love with Becky. After winning her over, Tom suggests that they "get engaged." But when Tom accidentally blurts that he has been engaged before to Amy Lawrence, he ruins his relationship with Becky and becomes heartbroken.

One night, Huck and Tom sneak off at midnight to the town's graveyard, where they are planning to carry out a special ritual used to cure warts. Believers in superstition and folklore, the two expect the graveyard to be full of ghosts. After hearing voices approach them, the two boys hide in fear; the voices belong to Injun Joe - the villainous savage, Muff Potter- the town drunk, and Dr. Robinson. The three men are grave robbing! Soon, a fight breaks out between Dr. Robinson and the two other men. As Dr. Robinson grabs a headboard and knocks the liquored Muff Potter into unconsciousness, Injun Joe grabs Muff's knife and stabs the doctor to death. The boys run away from the graveyard before they learn that Injun Joe is planning on framing Muff for the doctor's murder. Fearful of Injun Joe and horrified at what they have witnessed, Huck and Tom vow to keep silent regarding the night's events.

The next day brings only grief for Tom. Aunt Polly learns from Sid that Tom snuck out the night before and cries over him. At school, Becky snubs Tom by paying no heed to his boyish antics. Hurt and angry, Tom assembles a "gang" of pirates: himself, Joe Harper, and Huck. The three boys decide that they have had enough of normal society and run away to Jackson Island, in the middle of the Mississippi River. When the boys are missing, the whole town assumes that they have drowned in the river and villagers drag the river for their bodies. In the darkness of the night, Tom sneaks off the island to return home and leave a note for Aunt Polly informing her that he is not dead. Instead, he overhears Polly and Mrs. Harper making plans for their funerals. The boys then wait until the morning of their own funeral, sneak back into town and attend their own funerals before revealing to the congregation that they are alive!

At school, the boys are the envy of each pupil; however, Tom has still not won back Becky's heart. When Tom inadvertently catches Becky reading the schoolmaster's book, she jump out of surprise and breaks it. Later that day, when the schoolmaster questions Becky whether it was she who broke the book, Tom lies and says that it was he who committed the act. Although he takes the punishment for Becky, he wins back her love and attention.

After school is let out for the summer, Muff Potter's trial begins. The town of St. Petersburg has already convicted the innocent man in their minds. Tom and Huck are both racked by their guilty consciences, and are made to feel even worse when Muff Potter thanks them for being kind to him. When the trial begins, the defense council calls Tom Sawyer to the witness stand. To the surprise of Huck, Muff Potter, and all those who are in the audience, Tom divulges all he

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knows about the murder, naming Injun Joe as Dr. Robinson's killer. Before the trial ends, Injun Joe sprints out of the courtroom before anybody can catch him.

Injun Joe is declared missing and Muff Potter is set free with the apologies of the town. Meanwhile, Tom is afraid that Injun Joe will attempt to seek revenge on him for being a witness, and Huck holds similar fears. One day, Huck and Tom decide to dig for buried treasure at the old haunted house on Cardiff Hill. As they begin their search, the entrance of two strange men surprises the boys. In hiding, Tom and Huck realize that one of the men is Injun Joe in disguise as a deaf-and-dumb Spaniard. Tom and Huck watch as Injun Joe and his accomplice discuss plans for a "revenge job." The two villains are planning to hide a bag of six-hundred dollars in the haunted house and meet back there; but when they hide their bag of money, they discover a box of buried treasure that has already been hidden in the haunted house - treasure that once belonged to a gang of robbers. The villains decide to hide their loot in "Number Two" under "the cross" and exit the house. Obsessed with obtaining the treasure, Tom and Huck make plans to follow Injun Joe and find out where the treasure is buried.

Becky, who has been out-of-town, returns to St. Petersburg and holds a picnic for all of her friends. As part of the picnic festivities, the children go exploring in MacDougal's cave: a large cave with secret underground passageways. Unbeknownst to the other picnickers and adults, Tom and Becky lose themselves within the depths of the cave.

In the meantime, Huck has resigned himself to waiting outside the Temperance Tavern, where they suspect Injun Joe is staying. On the brink of giving up, Huck's patience is rewarded when the two villain step out into the night and head off towards the haunted house. But instead of entering the haunted house, the villains go toward the old Widow Douglas's house, with the intention of torturing - and maybe even killing - her. Remembering times when the widow bestowed her kindness upon him, Huck races toward the Mr. Jones's house, informing him of Injun Joe's plans to hurt the widow. Mr. Jones and his two younger sons hurry over to the widow's estate and scare off Injun Joe and his accomplice before any harm is done.

The word of Widow Douglas's near attack is circulated around town. But news of the missing children breaks out, and for the moment, the entire town concentrates on praying and searching for Tom and Becky. Deep within the cave, Tom and Becky have lost all sense of direction. With the last of their candle burnt out and no food to eat, the two are aware that they may starve to death. Tom attempts to comfort Becky, and continues to explore the cave's passages in hoping of finding a way out. Winding down one passageway, Tom sees a man and shouts to him; to his surprise, the figure belongs to Injun Joe! Frightened by Tom's shouts (and not recognizing the boy's voice), Injun Joe runs away. Tom never tells Becky of this incident, for fear that we would cause her even more worries. Eventually, Tom's persistence pays off when he discovers a tiny hole that the children manage to crawl through and escape peril.

With the safe return of Becky and Tom, the town of St. Petersburg rejoices. Judge Thatcher orders that the door to MacDougal's cave be locked and sealed with metal. When Tom learns of this, he tells finally tells the Judge that Injun Joe is in the cave. Upon breaking the sealed door, Tom, the Judge, and the other citizens find Injun Joe at the mouth of the cave, starved to death.

When he meets up with Huck, Tom informs him that he knows where the treasure is buried. Mistaking the treasure for lost, Huck is eager to return to MacDougal's cave with Tom in search of the money. After recovering the treasure from the cave, the two boys return to town, only to be ushered into the Widow Douglas's parlor. To express her gratitude towards Huck for saving her life, the widow intends on giving Huck a permanent home and providing him with an education. Declaring that Huck is now independently wealthy, Tom spring forward with their newfound treasure, totaling over twelve thousand dollars. To conclude, to novel ends with Huck and Tom discussing their future plans of becoming world-class robbers.

10.5 THEMES

MORAL AND SOCIAL MATURATION

When the novel opens, Tom is engaged in and often the organizer of childhood pranks and make-believe games. As the novel progresses, these initially consequence-free childish games take on more and more gravity. Tom leads himself, Joe Harper, Huck, and, in the cave, Becky Thatcher into increasingly dangerous situations. He also finds himself in predicaments in which he must put his concern for others above his concern for himself, such as when he takes Becky's punishment and when he testifies at Injun Joe's trial. As Tom begins to take initiative to help others instead of himself, he shows his increasing maturity, competence, and moral integrity.

Tom's adventures to Jackson's Island and McDougal's Cave take him away from society. These symbolic removals help to prepare him to return to the village with a new, more adult outlook on his relationship to the community. Though early on Tom looks up to Huck as much older and wiser, by the end of the novel, Tom's maturity has surpassed Huck's. Tom's personal growth is evident in his insistence, in the face of Huck's desire to flee all social constraints, that Huck stay with the Widow Douglas and become civilized.

SOCIETY'S HYPOCRISY

Twain complicates Tom's position on the border between childhood and adulthood by ridiculing and criticizing the values and practices of the adult world toward which Tom is heading. Twain's harshest satire exposes the hypocrisy and often the essential childishness of social institutions such as school, church, and the law, as

well as public opinion. He also mocks individuals, although when doing so he tends to be less biting and focuses on flaws of character that we understand to be universal.

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Twain shows that social authority does not always operate on wise, sound, or consistent principles and those institutions fall prey to the same kinds of mistakes that individuals do. In his depiction of families, twain shows parental authority and constraint balanced by parental love and indulgence. Though she attempts to restrain and punish Tom, Aunt Polly always relents because of her love for her nephew. As the novel proceeds, a similar tendency toward indulgence becomes apparent within the broader community as well. The community shows its indulgence when Tom's dangerous adventures provoke an outpouring of concern: the community is perfectly ready to forgive Tom's wrongs if it can be sure of his safety. Twain ridicules the ability of this collective tendency toward generosity and forgiveness to go overboard when he describes the town's sentimental forgiveness of the villainous Injun Joe after his death.

The games the children play often seem like attempts to subvert authority and escape from conventional society. Skipping school, sneaking out at night, playing tricks on the teacher, and running away for days at a time are all ways of breaking the rules and defying authority. Yet, Twain shows us that these games can be more conventional than they seem. Tom is highly concerned with conforming to the codes of behavior that he has learned from reading, and he outlines the various criteria that define a pirate, a Robin Hood, or a circus clown. The boys' obsession with superstition is likewise an addiction to convention, which also mirrors the adult society's focus on religion. Thus, the novel shows that adult existence is more similar to childhood existence than it might seem. Though the novel is critical of society's hypocrisy that is, of the frequent discord between its values and its behavior Twain doesn't really advocate subversion. The novel demonstrates the potential dangers of subverting authority just as it demonstrates the dangers of adhering to authority too strictly.

FREEDOM THROUGH SOCIAL EXCLUSION

St. Petersburg is an insular community in which outsiders are easily identified. The most notable local outsiders include Huck Finn, who fends for himself outside of any family structure because his father is a drunkard; Muff Potter, also a drunk; and Injun Joe, a malevolent half-breed. Despite the community's clear separation of outsiders from insiders, however, it seems to have a strong impulse toward inclusiveness. The community tolerates the drunkenness of a harmless rascal like Muff Potter, and Huck is more or less protected even though he exists on the fringes of society. Tom too is an orphan who has been taken in by Aunt Polly out of love and filial responsibility. Injun Joe is the only resident of St. Petersburg who is completely excluded from the community. Only after Injun Joe's death are the townspeople able to transform him, through their manipulation of his memory, into a tolerable part of St. Petersburg society.

SUPERSTITION IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

Twain first explores superstition in the graveyard, where Tom and Huck go to try out a magical cure for warts. From this point forward, superstition becomes an important element in all of the boys' decision-making. The convenient aspect of Tom and Huck's superstitious beliefs is that there are so many of them, and they are so freely interpretable; Tom and Huck can pick and choose whichever belief suits their needs at the time. In this regard, Twain suggests, superstition bears a resemblance to religion—at least as the populace of St. Petersburg practices it.

The humorousness of the boys' obsession with witches, ghosts, and Graveyards papers over, to some extent, the real horror of the circumstances to which the boys are exposed: grave digging, murder, starvation, and attempted mutilation. The relative ease with which they assimilate these ghastly events into their childish world is perhaps one of the least realistic aspects of the novel. (If the novel were written today, we might expect to read about the psychic damage these extreme childhood experiences have done to these boys.) The boys negotiate all this horror because they exist in a world suspended somewhere between reality and make-believe. Their fear of death is real and pervasive, for example, but we also have the sense that they do not really understand death and all of its ramifications.

10.6 MOTIFS

CRIME

The many crimes committed in the novel range from minor childhood transgressions to capital offenses from playing hooky to murder. The games the boys prefer center on crime as well, giving them a chance to explore the boldness and heroism involved in breaking social expectations without actually threatening the social order. The boys want to be pirates, robbers, and murderers even though they feel remorse when they actually commit the minor crime of stealing bacon. The two scenes in which Tom plays Robin Hood who, in stealing from the rich and giving to the poor is both a criminal and a hero are emblematic of how Tom associates crime with defending values and even altering the structure of society.

TRADING

The children in the novel maintain an elaborate miniature economy in which they constantly trade amongst themselves treasures that would be junk to adults. These exchanges replicate the commercial relationships in which the children will have to engage when they get older. Many of the complications that money creates appear in their exchanges. Tom swindles his friends out of all their favorite objects through a kind of false advertising when he sells them the opportunity to whitewash the fence. He then uses his newly acquired wealth to buy power and prestige at Sunday

school—rewards that should be earned rather than bought. When Tom and Joe fight over the tick in class, we see a case in which a disagreement leads the boys, who have been sharing quite civilly, to revert to a quarrel over ownership.

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The jump from this small-scale property holding at the beginning of the novel to the $12,000 treasure at the end is an extreme one. In spite of all Tom and Huck's practice, their money is given to a responsible adult. With their healthy allowance, the boys can continue to explore their role as commercial citizens, but at a more moderate rate.

THE CIRCUS

The boys mention again and again their admiration for the circus life and their desire to be clowns when they grow up. These references emphasize the innocence with which they approach the world. Rather than evaluate the real merits and shortcomings of the various occupations Tom and Hank could realistically choose, they like to imagine themselves in roles they find romantic or exciting.

SHOWING OFF

Tom's showing off is mostly directed toward Becky Thatcher. When he shows off initially, we guess that he literally prances around and does gymnastics. Later, the means by which Tom and Becky try to impress each other grow more subtle, as they manipulate Amy and Alfred in an effort to make each other jealous.

In the Sunday school scene, Twain reveals that showing off is not strictly a childhood practice. The adults who are supposed to be authority figures in the church are so awed by Judge Thatcher and so eager to attract his attention and approval that they too begin to behave like children. The room devolves into an absolute spectacle of ridiculous behavior by children and adults alike, culminating in the public embarrassment in which Tom exposes his ignorance of the Bible.

10.7 SYMBOLS

THE CAVE

The cave represents a trial that Tom has to pass before he can graduate into maturity. Coming-of-age stories often involve tests in which the protagonist is separated from the rest of the society for a period of time and faces significant dangers or challenges. Only after having survived on the strength of his personal resources is Tom ready to rejoin society.

THE STORM

The storm on Jackson's Island symbolizes the danger involved in the boys' removal from society. It forms part of an interruptive pattern in the novel, in which periods of relative peace and tranquility alternate with episodes of high adventure or danger.

Later, when Tom is sick, he believes that the storm hit to indicate that God's wrath is directed at him personally. The storm thus becomes an external symbol of Tom's conscience.

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THE TREASURE

The treasure is a symbolic goal that marks the end of the boys' journey. It becomes a indicator of Tom's transition into adulthood and Huck's movement into civilized society. It also symbolizes the boys' heroism, marking them as exceptional in a world where conformity is the rule.

THE VILLAGE

Many readers interpret the small village of St. Petersburg as a microcosm of the United States or of society in general. All of the major social institutions are present on a small scale in the village and all are susceptible to Twain's comic treatment. The challenges and joys Tom encounters in the village are, in their basic structure, ones that he or any reader could expect to meet anywhere.

10.8 GLOSSARY

All the old graves were sunken in A reference to the fact that a mound over the grave meant that a new coffin has just been buried and the displaced soil mounded up over the coffin.

balm of Gilead anything healing or soothing.

Barlow knife a single blade knife that cost 12 cents.

Big Missouri the name often applied to the Missouri River; also the name of a large steam ship often seen in Hannibal, Missouri.

bully taw An excellent marble. A taw is a fancy marble used to shoot with in playing marbles.

caitiff a mean, evil, or cowardly person.

David and Goliath The story of David slaying the giant Goliath and saving the kingdom comes from the Old Testament. David and Goliath precede the disciples by around 1,500 years.

Doré Bible an expensively illustrated Bible by the famous French illustrator, Gustave Doré (1833nd1883) whose most famous works include illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy.*

Evening Southern and Southwestern for afternoon.

ferule a flat stick or ruler used for punishing children.

hogshead a large barrel or cask holding from 63 to 140 gallons (238 to 530 liters).

hove heaved or threw.

hy'roglyphics a picture or symbol representing a word, syllable, or sound, used by the ancient Egyptians and others instead of alphabetical letters.

inveterate to be addicted to or to become a habit.

knucks, ring-taw, and keeps types of games played with marbles.

labboard and stabboard Ben Rogers means to say "larboard," the left-hand side of a ship as one faces forward (port) and "starboard," the right-hand side of a ship as one faces forward. His mis-usage suggests his ignorance of the steamboat.

lucifer matches These were the then newly invented friction matches with the standard phosphorus compound on top which could light by striking it on some solid material.

lugubrious very sad or mournful, especially in a way that seems exaggerated or ridiculous.

Murrell's gang a band of robbers that roved a part of the frontier and gained only minor recognition.

'NUFF A type of contraction for "enough" meaning that the defeated party has had enough of the fight and concedes victory.

Old Scratch Another name for the devil.

orgies Tom misuses the word to mean having a big Indian-type "pow-wow" or celebration.

pariah any person despised or rejected by others; outcast. In reality, Huck Finn does not fit this description, but is so viewed by the members of the town. To the other boys, he is the romantic outcast, someone to be envied.

pinchbug a type of relatively harmless beetle.

roundabout a short, tight jacket or coat formerly worn by men and boys.

serape a brightly colored, wool blanket, used as an outer garment by men in Spanish-American countries. Here it is used by Injun Joe to disguise his identity.

Six Nations the five Indian nations (Mohawks, Oneidas, Onandagas, Cayugas, and Senecas as a group) of the Iroquois confederacy plus the Tuscaroras.

slathers a large amount. Tom wants to be a clown in the circus because a clown earn "slathers of money."

Spare the rod, and spile the child. "Spile" is southwestern dialect for "spoil." The saying is attributed by Aunt Polly to the Bible, and the original can be found in Proverbs 13:24: "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes." The wording that Aunt Polly uses comes from the seventeenth-century satirist, Samuel Butler (1612nd1680).

spunk-water This could be a variation of "skunk-water," a rank smelling stagnant water found often in rotten vegetation and in tree stumps.

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stalactite an icicle-shaped mineral deposit, usually a calcium compound, that hangs from the roof of a cavern and is formed by the evaporation of dripping water that is full of minerals.

tackle it again try to learn the lesson again.

white Alley An alley is a fine marble used as the shooter in playing marbles.

whitewash a mixture of lime, whiting, size, water, etc., for whitening walls and other surfaces.

witches and witch detecting Twain is making fun of the many ways by which a person can theoretically determine whether or not a person is a witch.

Yawl a small, two-masted sailing vessel usually manned by four to six oarsmen and used for duties for which a larger vessel could not maneuver.

zephyr a soft, gentle breeze.

10.9 STUDY QUESTIONS

How does Tom Sawyer change over the course of the story?

The beginning of the novel shows Tom as a crafty, intelligent, and imaginative boy with excellent theatrical skills and an intuitive understanding of human nature. He expends his immense personal resources mainly on tricks and games on getting into and then out of trouble in the real world and on elaborates flights of make-believe. He rarely takes anything seriously and seems to have no real conflicts.

The murder of Dr. Robinson is the first serious conflict to present itself in the story, and we see Tom begin to change after he witnesses it. His anxiety and guilt about Muff Potter's fate are plain in the scenes in which he tries to get Huck to reconsider their vow to secrecy. The decision he finally makes is independent by every indication, however. Tom decides to follow his conscience despite the ties that have bound him—his devotion to loyalty, superstition, and his personal safety.

Tom's disregard of his own interest prepares us for even greater transformations in his character. In taking Becky Thatcher's punishment, Tom exercises a preliminary heroism that conforms more to his storybook notions of chivalry and romance than it resolves a real conflict. His chivalry and competence while he and Becky are trapped in the cave, however, represent a more meaningful, adult version of the same lesson in self-sacrifice and concern for others. When Tom encourages Huck to return to the Widow Douglas's house in the final scene, his transformation is complete. Though he does not cease to be a playful and fun-loving character, he has learned through experiencing various dangers and mistakes to value the resources of home and community and to accept a certain measure of outside authority.

Analyze the character of Aunt Polly and her relationship to Tom.

Though Tom and Aunt Polly position themselves as foes within the family he as the troublemaker and she as the disciplinarian they are actually similar in many ways. Aunt Polly has a humorous appreciation for Tom's cleverness and his antics that often prevents her from disciplining him as severely as she should. At times, she tries to beat him at his own game for example, when she tries to trick him into confessing that he has gone swimming instead of to school. But, despite their superficially adversarial relationship, there is a real bond of loyalty and love between Tom and Aunt Polly. The worst punishment she can inflict on Tom is to cry or be hurt by his behavior. Similarly, the misdeed of Tom's that she reacts to most strongly be his inconsiderate allowance of her suffering when she thinks that he is dead. Tom spies on the scene of the family's mourning for him, and Aunt Polly finds the piece of bark with the message on it in Tom's pocket each character is extremely gratified by discovering indisputable evidence of the other's affection. Aunt Polly thus embodies a more positive kind of authority than the rest of adult society because her strictness is balanced with real love and concern. Like Tom, she exhibits the truly positive elements of social relations, without all the hypocrisy and insincerity.

What role does alcohol and images of drunkenness play in the novel?

For a children's adventure story, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is rich in references to drinking and alcohol. Huck's father and Muff Potter are both alcoholics. Tom and Huck accidentally find whiskey in the back rooms of the Temperance Tavern. Tom joins the Cadets of Temperance organization but then quits because it is too stringent. Even Aunt Polly dabbles innocently in alcohol, which is likely the main ingredient of the "patent medicines" she administers to Tom (and which he, in turn, administers to the cat).

This obsession with alcohol fits into the larger themes of the novel because *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is in many ways a story about pushing the limits of acceptable social behavior. Muff Potter is more or less tolerated, largely because he does very little harm. Huck's father, Pap, is a more ambiguous character because his debauchery has serious implications for his son. The issue of drinking also allows Twain to expand on the charges of hypocrisy that he levels against so many social proceedings. The temperance violations offer a prime example of the kind of transgressions people may hide under a surface of respectability. Even the schoolmaster, who should be a role model for the children, turns out to be a heavy drinker. Twain's focus on performances, charlatanism, and various kinds of false advertising finds another instance in the quack medicines of which Aunt Polly is so enamored. Unlike those who pretend to be sober but are not, Aunt Polly would probably be horrified to realize what she is actually getting for her money.

A bildungsroman is a novel about the education and maturing of its main character. To what extent can *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* be classified as a bildungsroman?

At first glance, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* seems to be a thoroughly traditional bildungsroman. After all, the novel shows Tom's transformation from a naughty boy into a hero praised by the adults in his community. But the adults in Twain's novel are no more mature than the children they're raising. Twain does not narrate a change in Tom's personality, but rather a change in the foolish adults' perception of Tom. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* reveals itself to be an unabashed celebration of the subversive spirit of childhood the exact opposite of a bildungsroman.

On the surface, the novel presents a tale of one boy's moral development. In a famous early scene, Tom flaunts his skills as a prankster by convincing other children to whitewash his aunt's fence for him. He doesn't feel any remorse, even though his game hurts other people. He acts in a self-absorbed way again when he runs away from home, allowing his friends and neighbors to conclude that he has died before making a surprise appearance at his own funeral. But later events in the novel Tom's decision to save Becky, and his offer of half his money to Huck Finn convince the adults that Tom has reformed and turned into a man.

Throughout the novel, however, Twain plants evidence to suggest that the adult characters have poor judgment or are otherwise untrustworthy. For example, Tom manages to easily dupe his caregiver, the slave-owning Aunt Polly, by yelling, "Look behind you!" and jumping out the window. Another representative of the adult world, Huck's father, is both a negligent parent and a drunk. The august Judge Thatcher sees Tom as a "fine, manly little fellow," despite the fact that all the children in Sunday school know that Tom has cheated his way to the coveted Bible prize. Dr. Robinson attempts to dig up a corpse at night, Injun Joe is a murderer, and Mr. Dobbins whips students without proof of their misbehavior. A popular meeting spot for the adults, Temperance Tavern, serves alcohol in a backroom. Given the abundant examples of the adults' shortsightedness and hypocrisy, it seems doubtful that Twain wants to present adulthood as a condition to aspire to.

Tom begins and ends the novel as a well-meaning but mischievous boy. When Judge Thatcher praises him and says that he would be a good candidate for the National Military Academy and a career in law, he laughably misinterprets Tom's character. Despite Judge Thatcher's optimistic daydreaming, the end of the novel contains many examples of Tom's lingering boyishness. He wouldn't have had the opportunity to save Becky Thatcher from the cave, for example, if he hadn't led her into it in the first place. In his final scene, though Tom has become wealthy and received praise from both the Judge and Aunt Polly, he remains a sly and inventive child, envisioning himself as the leader of a robber gang that will find Injun Joe's buried treasure.

It's not surprising that *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* has become a beloved children's novel, because the novel contrasts the intelligence and good humor of children with the poor judgment of adults. Twain conceals his subversive message within the familiar structure of a bildungsroman, in which a boy gets into trouble and redeems himself before his superiors. But Tom does not turn into the obedient citizen the adults want him to be: At the end of the novel, he still dreams of causing chaos in a robbers' gang. His story celebrates the freedom, mischief, and excitement of youth, and suggests that children shouldn't hurry to grow up and become adults.

10.10 ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Analyze the relationship between Tom and Huck Finn, paying close attention to their trip to the graveyard and their hunt for treasure.
2. Analyze Tom's relationship to the other boys his age, paying close attention to the whitewashing scene and the scenes at school.
3. Discuss how Twain uses satire in the Sunday school scene.
4. Trace Tom's courtship of Becky. In what ways is their romance adult like? In what ways is it childish?
5. Discuss Twain's portrayal of the town's authority figures, especially Judge Thatcher, Mr. Dobbins, and the minister.
6. Analyze Twain's portrayal of Injun Joe. Does Twain want us to feel sympathy for Injun Joe? How can you tell?
7. Analyze the relationship between the adults and children of St. Petersburg. Focus especially on the adult reaction to Tom Sawyer.
8. Discuss Injun Joe as the epitome of evil.
9. Discuss the methods in which Twain brings unity to the loose structure of the novel.
10. Compare the characters of Injun Joe and Muff Potter.
11. Why is Huck Finn universally admired by all of the boys in the school, but is also despised by most of the adults.
12. Why is the Widow Douglas so drawn to Huck Finn even before he was discovered to be her protector?
13. How does the Widow Douglas try to regulate Huck's life? Why does Huck want to escape?
14. What qualities does Tom Sawyer possess that make the others always choose him as the Captain, or the Chief or the General or the Number One person in any game?

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15. What human qualities does Aunt Polly exhibit in her behavior toward Tom?
16. Discuss Twain's use of superstition throughout the novel and show how these superstitions affect the various actions.
17. Discuss how each of the minor characters is important to the entire novel: Judge Thatcher; Mr. Dobbins, the schoolmaster; Muff Potter; Mr. Jones, the Welshman; Amy Lawrence; and Joe Harper.

UNIT 11 SULA - TONI MORRISON

NOTES

Structure

11.0 INTRODUCTION

Published in 1973, *Sula* is Toni Morrison's second novel. Like her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, this one also deals with the life experiences of two black girls. Yet it does not merely address the childhood experiences but follows the girls as they grow into adulthood. *Sula* was created out of Morrison's desire to "write a second novel, about people in a black community not just foregrounded but totally dominant."

Sula is set in the post bellum American South during a time when racial segregation continued to divide white and black populations. Even veterans of World War I like Shadrack and Plum are treated differently because of their skin color. Neither receives benefits after returning from war but are, rather, left to wallow and remember their trauma. Shadrack is even expelled prematurely from a veteran's hospital to make room for other patients.

Morrison expressed concern when writing the book, which focused mainly on a black community for a largely white readership. To address this she created the Preface, which buffered the reader's introduction to Shadrack's internal crisis and shifted focus away from the pains inflicted on blacks by the war and discriminatory structural institutions.

Though sales were not high, *Sula* was well received by literary critics. It was nominated in 1975 for a National Book Award, and it won the Ohioana Book Award. A feature for the novel also appeared in the women's magazine *Redbook*.

NOTES

11.1 OBJECTIVE

The novel focuses on a young black girl named Sula, who matures into a strong and determined woman in the face of adversity and the distrust, even hatred, of her by the black community in which she lives. Morrison delves into the strong female relationships between the novel's women and how these bonds both nurture and threaten individual female identity. Also, she questions to what extent mothers will go to protect their children from a harsh world, and whether or not these maternal instincts ultimately are productive or harmful.

11.2 AUTHOR INTRODUCTION

Chloe Anthony Wofford, later known as Toni Morrison, was born in Lorain, Ohio, on February 18, 1931. She was the daughter of a shipyard welder and a religious woman who sang in the church choir. Morrison had a sister, Lois, and two younger brothers, George and Raymond. Her parents had moved to Ohio from the South, but their household was still steeped in the oral traditions of Southern African American communities. Although Toni Morrison's writing is not autobiographical, she fondly alludes to her past, stating, and "I am from the Midwest so I have a special affection for it. My beginnings are always there No matter what I write, I begin there It's the matrix for me Ohio also offers an escape from stereotyped black settings. It is neither plantation nor ghetto."

Toni Morrison's writing was greatly influenced by her family. Her grandparents had relocated to Ohio during the national movement of blacks out of the South known as the Great Migration. After leaving their farm in Alabama, Morrison's mother's parents (Ardelia and John Solomon Willis) moved to Kentucky, and then to Ohio. They placed extreme value in the education of their children and themselves. John Willis taught himself to read, and his stories became the inspiration for Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977).

Morrison was an extremely gifted student, learning to read at an early age and doing well at her studies at an integrated school. Morrison, who attended Hawthorne Elementary School, was the only African American in her first-grade classroom. She was also the only student who began school with the ability to read. Because she was so skilled, Morrison was often asked to help other students learn to read. She frequently worked with the children of new immigrants to America.

Morrison graduated with honors in 1949 and matriculated at Howard University in Washington D.C. At Howard, she majored in English and minored in classics, and was actively involved in theater arts through the Howard University Players. She graduated from Howard in 1953 with a B.A. in English and a new name: 'Toni Wofford' (Toni being a shortened version of her middle name). She went on to receive her M.A. in English from Cornell in 1955.

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After a teaching stint at Texas Southern University, Toni returned to Howard University and met Harold Morrison. They married, and before their divorce in 1964, Toni and Harold Morrison had two sons. It was also during this time that she wrote the short story that would become the basis for her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*.

In 1964, Morrison took a job in Syracuse, New York as an associate editor at Random House. She worked as an editor, raised her sons as a single mom, and continued to write fiction. In 1967, she received a promotion to senior editor and a much-desired transfer to New York City. *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970. The story of a young girl who loses her mind, it was published to little fanfare and much criticism. Between 1971 and 1972, Morrison worked as a Professor of English at the State University of New York at Purchase while holding her job at Random House and working on *Sula,* which was published in 1973.

The years 1976 and 1977 saw Morrison working as a visiting lecturer at Yale and working on her next novel, *Song of Solomon*. As with *Sula*, Morrison wrote the novel while holding a teaching position, continuing her work as an editor for Random House, and raising her two sons. *Song of Solomon* was published in 1977 and enjoyed both commercial and critical success. In 1981, Morrison published *Tar Baby*, a novel focusing on a stormy relationship between a man and a woman. In 1983, she left Random House. The next year she took a position at the State University of New York in Albany.

Beloved, the book that many consider Morrison's masterpiece, was published in 1987. Mythic in scope, *Beloved* tells the story of an emancipated slave woman named Sethe who is haunted by the ghost of the daughter she killed. The novel is an ambitious attempt to grapple with slavery and the tenacity of its legacy. Dedicated to the tens of millions of slaves who died as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, *Beloved* could be called a foundation story (like Genesis or Exodus) for Black America. It became a bestseller and received a Pulitzer Prize.

In 1987, Toni Morrison became the Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Council of Humanities at Princeton University. She was the first African American woman writer to hold a named chair at a university in the Ivy League. She published *Jazz* in 1992, along with a non-fiction book entitled *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. The next year, she became the eighth woman and the first black author to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. 1998 saw the publication of her seventh novel, *Paradise*. In subsequent years she published *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012), and *God Help the Child* (2015).

One of the most critically acclaimed American writers, Morrison was a major architect in creating a literary language for African Americans. Her work is told in black vernacular, black settings, and is focused on blackness deeply unusual for her time. Her work formed a distinctly black literary sensibility, while drawing a reading audience that cut across racial boundaries.

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On August 5th, 2019, Toni Morrison died at the age of 88 in New York, creating a crater-sized hole in the American literary landscape. But as Nikki Giovanni articulated in a 2019 interview with *Democracy Now!*, "We will never lose Toni Morrison. She will always be here." This is in part because of Morrison's staggering body of work, and also because of the legacy she leaves behind. Many of her peers and critics commend Morrison not only for her creation of a literary language for African Americans, but also for the way her writing privileged and displayed the interiority of Black America. Angela Davis credits Morrison with teaching the world "to imagine enslaved women and men with full lives, with complex subjectivities, with interiority," and essayist Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah says that by doing that, Morrison gave Black America "a record of gesture and custom and being and belonging."

Another aspect of Morrison's legacy was the work she did as an editor for Random House, working closely with black authors and publishing books by Muhammad Ali, Henry Dumas, Angela Davis, Huey P. Newton, Toni Cade Bambara, Gail Jones, etc. By highlighting and uplifting not just her own voice, but the voices of other black writers as well, Morrison paved the way for African American studies and Black female literary criticism in the academy. Morrison also published a work of literary criticism, and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama in 2012. As an author, editor, professor, and political commentator, Toni Morrison was a luminary.

11.3 CHARACTERS

SHADRACK

Founder of National Suicide Day, Shadrack is a veteran of war. A survivor of battle, Shadrack was hospitalized for over a year before he returned to the Bottom. He lives in a shack previously owned by his long deceased grandfather. On January 3 every year, in observance of National Suicide Day, he parades through the Bottom with a cowbell and lets everyone know that they may kill themselves or one another.

NEL WRIGHT

Nel is the daughter of Wiley and Helene Wright. She befriends Sula in childhood. After graduating from school, Nel marries Jude Greene.

HELENE WRIGHT

Helene is born behind the red shutters at the Sundown House, a place of prostitution. She is taken away from her birth mother, Rochelle, a Creole prostitute, by her grandmother Cecile Sabat. Raised in a strictly religious home, Helene grows up to be authoritative and devout. She marries Wiley Wright and gives birth to daughter Nel after 9 years of marriage. The family lives in a nice house in the Bottom.

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WILEY WRIGHT

Wiley Wright is the great nephew of Cecile Sabat. He is also Helene Sabat's husband and Nel's father. Wiley spends a lot of time away from home as chef on a ship company called the Great Lakes Line.

CECILE SABAT

Cecile is the great aunt of Wiley and grandmother to Helene. She raises Helene in a religious and strict home and cautions her against taking after Rochelle, Helene's mother. When Cecile falls ill and dies Helene takes her daughter Nel with her to New Orleans to say her last goodbyes.

SULA

The daughter of Hannah Peace and granddaughter of Eva Peace. She is a close childhood friend of Nel Wright. Sula has a birthmark on her eyelid that many think resembles a rose and a stem.

HANNAH PEACE

Hannah is Sula's mother and Eva's eldest child. Hannah is known in the Bottom for sleeping with many men, married or unmarried. She dies in a tragic fire accident.

EVA PEACE

Eva is the mother of three: Hannah, Pearl, and Ralph (or Plum). She mysteriously loses one of her legs after she is left by her husband BoyBoy. Eva owns a large home on Carpenter's Road where she houses many boarders and family members.

PEARL PECE

Eva's youngest daughter and namesake (her name is also Eva although she is called Pearl). Pearl is the only one of Eva's children who moves away from Medallion permanently. Pearl moves to Flint, Michigan at age 14 with her husband.

RALPH (PLUM) PEACE

Ralph, nicknamed Plum, is Eva's youngest and most loved child. He fights in World War I and returns drastically changed by his experiences. He dies in a fire.

THE SUGGS

Mr. and Mrs. Suggs are neighbors of the Peace family. They assist Eva after she is abandoned by BoyBoy, and they aid Hannah after the yard fire accident.

BOYBOY

BoyBoy was Eva's womanizing and abusive husband. He moves Eva away from her home in Virginia to Medallion at the insistence of his white employer. He abandons Eva and the children, leaving them without money or food.

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THE DEWEYS

The Deweys are three children who are taken in by Eva in 1921. Eva renames all of three boys Dewey. Each has his own physical characteristics and they are all different ages but they become very close to one another and learn to love only each other. Despite their differences, it is hard for people to tell them apart because they favor each other in thought and mannerisms. The Deweys remain the size of children throughout their years and are last seen on National Suicide Day in 1941.

TAR BABY

Tar Baby is a small, soft-spoken man who boards in Eva's house. He is rumored by some to have white ancestry although Eva considers him to be entirely white. Tar Baby is called Pretty Johnnie at first until Eva gives him a new nickname. He is a heavy drinker and is unable to maintain a job. Tar Baby spends much time alone and does not eat much. He is the first to join Shadrack in celebrating National Suicide Day.

HENRI MARTIN

The man who alerts Helene of her grandmother's sickness and also arranges things after Cecile's death.

ROCHELLE

Rochelle is Helene's Creole speaking mother from New Orleans. She is a former prostitute and smells like gardenias. Helene and Nel meet Rochelle when they travel to New Orleans for Cecile's funeral.

AJAX (A. JACKS, ALBERT JACKS)

Officially known as A. Jacks. Ajax is a 21-year0old man who is loved by women. He plays pool and is envied for the way he curses. He is one of seven children and the son of a conjure woman. Ajax becomes one of Sula's lovers.

PATSY AND VALENTINE

Friends of Hannah Peace. Both die during the tunnel collapse on January 3, 1941.

CHICKEN LITTLE

Chicken Little is a little boy Nel teases for picking his nose. In a horrible accident, Chicken Little falls into the river and drowns.

JUDE GREENE

Jude marries Nel at 20 years of age. He is a waiter and also sings tenor in the Mount Zion's Men's Quartet. Jude abandons Nel and his children.

REKUS

Rekus is Sula's father. He dies when she is three years old, leading to the family's return to Medallion.

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Teapot

A 5-year old boy who arrives at Sula's house asking for bottles. When he falls down Sula's stairs, the neighborhood accuses Sula of pushing him.

11.4 SUMMARY

Morrison's *Sula* is a story of motherhood, friendship, and love. It follows two girls, Nel and Sula, from childhood to adulthood and describes the way their deep bond is tested by societal norms. Set in a mostly black town in Ohio, the story explores the relationship between women in the segregated and patriarchal South. Nevertheless, the novel champions the many strong female characters it features as leaders, mothers, and property owners.

The narrator describes the town in which *Sula* is set by first announcing its destruction. Before it describes all that existed in the Bottom, the novel is already lamenting its loss. Shadrack, a veteran of war, who is physically injured and scarred by war, returns to Medallion a drunk and a rabble-rouser. His concentration on death leads him to found National Suicide Day, a holiday to be observed annually on January 3. On this day Shadrack parades down Carpenter's Road with a cowbell and tells the people that they may kill themselves or one another.

Helene and her daughter Nel travel to New Orleans to visit a dying relative. They experience the difficulties of the segregated and discriminatory South while traveling. Helene and Nel meet Helene's mother in New Orleans, who did not raise Helene on her own because she was a prostitute. When the two return Helene is glad to be separated from her shameful past and Nel is determined to one day be "wonderful." She begins this venture by befriending Sula against her mother's wishes.

Sula and the Peace family descend from the matriarch Eva Peace. When she arrives in Medallion, Eva is accompanied by her husband BoyBoy and her three children: Hannah, Pearl, and Ralph (Plum). They move to Medallion when BoyBoy is offered a job assisting a white carpenter. However, BoyBoy eventually abandons the family and Eva is forced to raise the children on her own. Exhausted and impoverished, she leaves the children with a neighbor for eighteen months and returns with a mysterious new prosperity and a missing leg. Eva uses her money to build a large home on Carpenter's Road where she accepts boarders and takes in children.

Sula and Nel become incredibly close friends in their youth. They do almost everything together and complete each other's sentences. The girls also come to

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share a dark secret when they participate in the accidental death of a young boy named Chicken Little. Nel and Sula keep their involvement in Chicken's death a secret and after his funeral, their friendship continues as before.

Chicken's death is accompanied by a few other deaths of major characters. Plum, returns from war with a drug addiction. He regresses and behaves like a child. Eva, wanting her son to die a man if he could not live like one, sets Plum on fire. Hannah is the next to die, burning alive after accidentally setting herself aflame while trying to do laundry.

As Sula and Nel grow up, they remain close. Sula even plans most of Nel's wedding when she marries Jude Greene. However, after her wedding night the girls do not see each other for another ten years, when Sula returns to Medallion after attending college and visiting other American cities.

When Sula returns, she has Eva placed into a nursing home. She enjoys reuniting with her childhood friend and reminiscing about the past. However, after Sula has an affair with Nel's husband, she is no longer able to speak to Nel, and she spends her life in Medallion hated and judged by the people of Medallion. Sula has a brief love affair with Ajax, an older man she knew of in girlhood. Ajax leaves, however, when Sula shows signs of becoming committed. Sula is saddened by his departure and shortly afterwards she falls ill.

Sula's illness brings the two women back together, although they had not spoken since Jude left Nel. They argue, and Nel becomes frustrated again by Sula's attitude toward conformity and tradition. After she leaves, Sula dies alone in the home on 7 Carpenter's Road. After Sula's death, the people of Medallion are pleased but they behave differently. In her absence, they abandon their righteous indignation and become slack in their roles as mothers, and daughters.

Sula's death also changes Shadrack, who no longer wants to celebrate National Suicide Day. However, he decides to carry his rope and bell for one more year. That January 3, many neighbors marched alongside Shadrack until they arrived at the construction site that had long been forbidden to black workers seeking jobs. Frustrated, some of the people begin to destroy the Tunnel, and they are killed when it collapses on them.

The story ends in the year 1965. Nel is 55 years old, and all of her kids have grown up. She visits Eva in the hospital and is forced to reflect on her role in Chicken's death. Nel realizes that she was complicit in his death and that she enjoyed watching him fall. At the novel's end, Nel also realizes that she has harbored a deep pain and sorrow about losing her friend Sula. She cries Sula's name into the air in an expression of grief and realization.

When she conceived of the book in the late 1960s, Morrison was surrounded by feminist discourse that encouraged woman to unite with each other instead of competing. She wanted to show an example of the culturally acceptable sisterhood that she remembers from growing up in a black neighborhood, while also showing how that sisterhood can be strained by external forces.

11.5 THEMES

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RACE

Set in the post bellum south, the novel contains examples of lasting racism and prejudice. The division between the hill and valley areas of Medallion along racial lines indicates that segregation dictates the behaviors and lifestyles of the novel's characters. Nel expresses insecurity about her mother's mixed blood and lighter complexion. As she travels to New Orleans with her mother Helene, she realizes the uneven power dynamic that exists between whites and blacks. Race and racial prejudice pains the black people of the Bottom, who are continually denied opportunities for employment in place of their white neighbors.

WAR

Like another character in the novel, War acts as an agent of destruction. Two characters, Shadrack and Plum, become victims of war when they return from it mere shells of themselves. The war brings the men into contact with death (another major theme) in traumatic ways. Shadrack's observance of National Suicide Day is inspired by his experiences in war namely, his fear of death's unexpectedness and suddenness. Similarly, Plum's experiences at War cause him to regress back into childhood and errant behavior, such as theft and drug addiction. War also brings changes to the town of Medallion, affecting the economy and availability of jobs.

SHAME

At the novel's end, shame is revealed to be an essential part of community. The shame people in Medallion feel towards Sula and her actions motivates them to behave differently. They define themselves against her as a symbol of shame. When Sula dies and the community members no longer have an embodiment of shame, they begin to neglect their familial and maternal duties that they were so eager to fulfill when Sula lived. Helene also feels shame about being born to a prostitute. In similar fashion, she defines herself against her mother's example and becomes extremely conservative and judgmental.

ABSENT FATHERS

Accompanying the overwhelming matriarchal structure of the homes, there is also an absence of fathers in the novel. Men like BoyBoy and Jude are introduced in the novel, but each of them eventually abandons his paternal role. Even Wiley who remains married to Helene throughout the novel is often at sea and not present to be a father to Nel.

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MOTHERHOOD

The novel describes the various stresses and sacrifices of motherhood and offers varied examples of motherhood. Rochelle, Helene's prostitute mother, is considered unfit to raise her, and she is instead raised by her grandmother, Cecile. Just as Cecile raises Helene in a disciplined and strict home, so too does Helene raise her own daughter, Nel, stifling her imagination and independence. Helene places her own worth in Nel's upbringing and succeeds in manipulating Nel into a traditional marriage. Eva, a single mother, sacrifices greatly for her children. It is speculated that she sells her own leg for financial security. Eva tells her daughter that she never loved her, which affects Hannah's relationship with her own daughter Sula. Sula is pained to hear her mother say that she did not like her, though she loved her.

DEATH

Death occurs frequently in the novel and strikes suddenly. Tar Baby, Plum, and Shadrack become dependent on substances and appear to seek their own deaths. Shadrack is especially focused on death and institutes National Suicide Day, an annual observance devoted entirely to death. Both Plum and Hannah experience death by fire. When Nel mourns the departure of her husband Jude, the novel suggests that instead of clinging to the past, she instead ought to give in to death. *Sula* presents death as a companion to life and not an end to it. This is most evident when Sula speaks even after her heart has stopped breathing.

RELIGION

The people of the Bottom insist that nothing "can keep them from their God." Religion provides a moral standard for the population. Those, like Sula, who do not observe or respect it are seen as devils by the community. Religion also becomes indicative of social acceptability. Helene is taught to be devout by her grandmother, so that she will not follow the model of her mother who was a prostitute. Nel also becomes involved in the Church in her late adulthood, which leads her to the nursing home where Eva Peace resides.

11.6 MOTIFS

INVERTED WORLD ORDER

At the beginning of the novel, the Bottom is a black community situated atop a hill, above the valley town of Medallion, where the white community lives. Although the Bottom is geographically higher than Medallion, socially and economically the black community is considered lower than their white counterparts, as were all blacks in the early twentieth century, when the novel begins. Ironically, when the novel ends, the black community will have moved down into the valley, and the white people will have bought property and moved up onto the hilltop.

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Morrison creates situations in which characters behave differently from what we might expect. For example, in 1927, at Nel's wedding celebration, the old people dance with the young people, and the church women drink the spiked punch. Nel's mother, the staid and conservative Helene Wright, is so calm and relaxed — from drinking — that she doesn't seem to mind the damage being done to her immaculate house by the revelers.

Morrison repeats this theme of inversion by having seemingly negative characters cause positive reactions in people. After Sula's return in 1937, the Bottom's black community abandons its negative ways and adopts positive counterparts. Teapot's previously abusive mother, for example, suddenly becomes caring and nurturing, and women who formerly neglected their husbands now shower them with affection. Ironically, after Sula's death, the old order of negativity returns; the townspeople resume their previous, unhealthy behavior.

WOMEN

With very few exceptions, Morrison's female characters are fiercely independent and subvert the traditionally assigned roles of dutiful wife, mother, and daughter. Of this category, Sula and Eva are the most prominent. Nel, who is raised by her mother to accept without question the passive roles of wife, mother, and daughter, comes to recognize the power of womanhood by the novel's end, although it remains unclear just what she will do with this newfound knowledge.

Sula and Nel come to realize at an early age that because they are neither white nor male, most freedoms and triumphs will be denied them throughout their lives. When Sula returns to the Bottom after having experienced life in many large cities across the country, she notes how dismal the lives of the black women in the community are; she sees "how the years had dusted their bronze with ash," and that "Those [women] with husbands had folded themselves into starched coffins, their sides bursting other people's skinned dreams and bony regrets." Sula's feminist spirit makes her refuse to settle for a woman's traditional lot of marriage and child raising. The Bottom's women hate her because she is the antithesis of their own dreadful lives of resignation. Economically, the women are unable to leave the Bottom, but those who do — like Sula — are likely to return to the black community, for from it they gain the little power afforded them in a racist society.

Sula is the most determined, carefree woman of all the novel's female characters. Her attraction to Ajax originates from her need to have someone more free-wheeling and independent than she. Ajax seems to be the warrior his name suggests, especially when he brings her the bottles of milk. Sula excitedly believes that he must have "done something dangerous to get them," which she greatly appreciates. However, her sole attempt at domesticity sounds the death knell of the relationship. Detecting the scent of the nest, Ajax realizes that Sula is becoming the antithesis of the free-spirited, independent woman whom he was initially attracted to.

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Throughout the novel, women's perceptions of love are ambiguous and never clearly defined. For example, to Eva, love is being patriarch ally maternal; it gives her license to kill the drug-addicted Plum and possibly Hannah. Eva is the biblical Eve, the mother of all living things, which explains the variety of people living in her home. Although only some of the inhabitants are boarders, Eva still involves herself maternally in their lives. She constantly offers unsolicited advice to new brides on keeping a man. Even with her physical disability, she flirts unashamedly with all the men who surround her. However, these relationships are never consummated, which contrasts to the sexual behavior of her daughter Hannah, who consummates her liaisons with her many gentlemen admirers and without discretion.

In contrast to Sula's self-assured feminism, Nel represses her self-expression and yields to the oppression of white society and black men. Her loss of Jude results in essentially the loss of her own identity because the vast majority of women of this era believed that a husband gave a woman her place in the community. Growing up, Nel, whose imagination was systematically driven underground by her pretentious and staid mother, Helene Wright, seeks emotional solace from Sula, who defers to no one. The girls rejoice in the sexually charged attention they get from the community's men, who tauntingly call them "pig meat.

"However, after the dissolution of her marriage, Nel never actively seeks the company of men giving up after only a few lukewarm attempts at a relationship. Instead, she resigns herself to devoting the rest of her life to her children. She allows herself to be chosen by men, while Sula does her own choosing. By the end of the novel, when Nel cries out to Sula, she laments not only for her long-lost friend but also for her own wasted potential, recognizing that she has lost the chance to develop into the fullness of her own womanhood.

RACISM

The effects of racism upon black American life are a major ingredient in all of Morrison's novels, as she explores the differences between the races' humanity and cultural values. Racism, in all its myriad forms, whether blatant or subliminal, is a part of every scene in *Sula,* with every aspect of the novel expressing some color of racism. Even the laughter of the Bottom is a laughter born of pain — a series of cruel jokes directed against the laughers themselves.

One example of the Bottom's own racism is Helene Wright's concern over her daughter Nel's physical features. Although Helene does not want Nel to be as fair skinned as she is this so-called advantage can mean trouble in a color-conscious society she still forces her daughter to pull her nose in order to make it narrower. And yet Helene herself is the victim of racism, for having grown up in New Orleans, she knows the dangers of breaking Jim Crow laws, the mandates that segregated white society from black. Returning by train to New Orleans for her grandmother's funeral, Helene realizes immediately that she has accidentally stepped over the line that separates the two races when a white conductor catches her in a Whites Only car.

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Another example of the white society's racist attitudes occurs later in the novel when a white bargeman finds Chicken Little's corpse washed ashore at the river's edge. Annoyed at the inconvenience of having to tote the black child's body to the sheriff, the bargeman reacts as though it is not a human life that has been lost. He cannot identify with the blacks of the Bottom as being as human as he is. He even believes that the blacks are so savage that they would kill their own children, which, to him, explains Chicken Little's body being in the river.

In a society that segregates its healthcare facilities, many of which did not allow blacks to step inside their doors, it is not surprising that even those individuals whose skin is white but who have ethnic backgrounds other than Anglo-Saxon are treated better than the Bottom's black residents. One of the key points Morrison makes in this novel is that newcomers white immigrants are given preferential treatment for menial jobs, while blacks, with their long history of living in the valley, are mistreated even by the white immigrants, who, ironically, are themselves looked down on by the established white community; unfortunately, one of the ways that they regain their self-respect is by harassing blacks.

FIRE AND WATER

Throughout *Sula,* the combative elements of fire and water are closely linked to the ever-present motif of death. As a result of the constant references to these elements, the novel projects qualities of creativity and destructiveness that continually transform the images of nature. Among the many motifs, fire is perhaps referred to most frequently.

The first character to die from fire is Plum, whom Eva sets ablaze. The nature of his death is foretold in how he gets high from drugs: His bent spoon is black from "steady cooking." When Plum is burning in his room from the fire that Eva set, it is Hannah who says to Eva, "He's burning, Mamma!" Eva casually responds in false disbelief, "Is? My baby? Burning?" And, on the day that Hannah dies by fire, there is an unnatural, intense heat as Eva rationalizes her role in Plum's burning.

Sula's return to the Bottom after a ten-year absence portends death associated with fire. She confronts Eva and threatens her with the same means of death as happened to Plum, whom Sula knows Eva set on fire. Sula says to Eva, " maybe I'll just tip on up here with some kerosene and who knows you may make the brightest flame of them all." Later, when Sula visits Nel, Nel asks her if she wants a cool drink. Sula answers, "Mmmm. Lots of ice, I'm burnin' up," foreshadowing her eventual death by a fever that is described as a "kind of burning." And just prior to Sula's dying, when she wakes from a dream, she is "gagging and overwhelmed with the smell of smoke," although nothing in the house is on fire. Ironically, as Sula dies, she experiences "liquid pain"; she remembers, in death, the promise of a "sleep of water always," and how she would "know the water was near, and she would curl into its heavy softness and it would envelop her, carry her, and wash her tired flesh always." Sula and Plum are the only characters

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in the novel who so completely embody the images of fire and water at their deaths. Generally, the women in *Sula* die of fire, traditionally a masculine element, and the men in the novel die of water, a feminine element.

Although his death is from fire, Plum, a passive character, figuratively drowns. As Eva holds him in her arms just before killing him, her face is awash with tears as she remembers Plum as a child in the bathtub, dripping water playfully onto her bosom. Plum, clearly Eva's favorite, is described as having "floated in a constant swaddle of love and affection" Eva immerses him in kerosene, and just before he dies, he perceives that he is floating, womb-like, and drowning. Morrison describes his death, although by fire, as "some kind of wet light traveling over his legs and stomach with a deeply attractive smell splashing and running into his skin Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought."

Shadrack is also associated with water, although the biblical Shadrack, in Daniel 3:8–18, is cast into a fiery furnace but emerges unscathed by the flames. *Sula's* Shadrack, a fisherman by trade, is the only witness to Chicken Little's watery death, and it is he who unknowingly leads many members of the black community to their deaths by drowning. Now living in a shack on the riverbank, when he first saw himself after being released from the military hospital after World War I, he looked into a distorted, watery reflection in water. He wanted water most of all, so much so that when he left the hospital, he immediately sought to know where the river was.

At the end of the novel, many people die of drowning on National Suicide Day, having followed Shadrack to the New River Road tunnel. Tar Baby and the deweys die there, as does Mrs. Jackson, partly because of the ice that she had craved and eaten all her life. Ironically, the hymn "Shall We Gather at the River" will probably be sung at the many funerals to follow, as it was at Sula's.

Another instance of death by drowning is Chicken Little's accidental death in the river. In describing this death, Morrison notes that "the water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank." The phrase "the closed place in the water" becomes a metaphor for death.

11.7 GLOSSARY

alabaster Originally, alabaster was a marble used by craftsmen to create beautifully lustered statues; today, alabaster is a granular form of the mineral gypsum, a colorless, white, or yellow mineral. White alabas- ter is the most highly prized.

bayonet fixed A bayonet is a weapon resembling a short sword or dagger that is attached to the muzzle of a rifle. Shadrack's bayonet is "fixed" — attached to the end of his gun and held forward, ready to stab or thrust into the enemy. During World War I, the U.S. Army used bayonets with 16-inch blades, sharpened along the full-length of the leading edge and along most of the back.

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bent spoon black from steady cooking Plum is addicted to heroin; he buys it in solid form and places it on a spoon, which he then puts over a fire in order to melt it into a liquid. Because addicts are usually too shaky to hold the spoon with a pair of pliers until the heroin is liquid and ready for injection, they bend back the spoon handle like a Christmas tree ornament hook and then slip it over the side of a pan in order to keep the spoon steady.

Bert Williams In the late 1800s, Williams was a popular black come- dian on the vaudeville circuit; he was the first black entertainer to become a major Broadway attraction.

Bessie Smith (d. 1937) An American singer famous for her jazz and blues singing in the 1920s, she was known as the Empress of the Blues.

bid whist a card game similar to bridge.

big Daughter Elk an important member of the ladies' auxiliary of the Elks, a men's fraternal order.

Big Mamma a southern term for "grandmother."

a bit of a cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of "messing around" The cakewalk and the black bottom are names of lively dances; messing around is a euphemism for flirting and touching.

Black Draught (pronounced "draft") a heavy salt concoction sold to poor people, who mixed it with molasses and used it as a tonic and laxative.

bottles of milk At that time, milk was delivered to homes in bottles with paper lids and left on doorsteps. Ajax steals the bottles of milk that he gives to Sula from a white family's doorstep.

bottom land The most desirable land that a person can own, true bottom land is rich and fertile and characterized by its dark, loamy tex- ture. In the novel, years of rain and erosion have slowly washed the valu- able top soil down from the surrounding hills to the true "bottom," or valley, and created this so-called bottom land, yielding far better crops than what people harvest on the nutrient-poor, hard-to-cultivate soil up in the hills.

Camels wrappers Camels was a popular brand of cigarettes in this era and one of the few brands available.

cane liquor home-brewed liquor made from sugar cane; possibly the cane was barged upriver as a trade item.

catarrh inflammation of the mucous membranes, especially of the nose or throat.

a cat's-head stickpin In southern culinary slang, a cat's-head is a big lumpy biscuit, so BoyBoy's stickpin would probably be large and ostenta-tious, in bad taste.

chamois a soft leather made from the hide of the chamois, a goat-like antelope native to Europe's mountainous regions.

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citified straw hat The reference is to a straw hat worn for purely deco- rative reasons. Eva might have been able to forgive BoyBoy for having left her with three children to support, but his overly pompous return as a pretentious, quasi-sophisticated "citified" person makes her finally feel inferior enough to be able to hate him thoroughly.

Clabber Girl Baking Powder 1930s baking product with a picture of a white girl with blonde hair on the package.

The closed place in the water spread before them. Morrison uses this phrase repeatedly to refer to death; the phrase recalls Chicken Little's drowning in the river: "The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank."

Colored Only This chapter underscores the South's strict adherence to the laws of segregation. When Helene breaks one of these laws by walk- ing through the Whites Only car of the train, she is sternly reprimanded and could have been arrested had she not apologized profusely and flashed a blindly subservient smile.

the colored ward of the hospital Because of strict segregation laws at the time, black patients were separated from white patients in all areas of the hospital, including the emergency room, regardless of the severity of a patient's injuries.

Come, chere Come here, darling.

Comment t'appelle? What's your name?

conjure woman one who deals in the "spirit" world, or the occult, and works with roots to render spells.

copperhead a poisonous North American snake with a reddish-brown body and darker crossbands on its body.

the *Courier* The reference is to the *Pittsburgh Courier,* one of the most widely circulated black newspapers at that time.

creole In New Orleans, many of the residents are Creole — that is, of mixed black, French and Spanish, and Portuguese ancestry; the Creole language contains a blend of multilingual phrases.

custard custard-colored; a mulatto color. It also means something soft and insubstantial, not firm.

dip-down walk a swagger-like gait, lifting the heels high and rocking for a split second on the balls of the feet before taking the next step; the walk was created by young black males in order to appear sexy and attractive to young women.

direc'lin directly, or right away.

dolesome sorrowful; filled with grief.

dropsy refers to the modern-day medical term "edema," which is the accumulation of water in the body's tissues or in the body cavity, giving the body a sagging look.

During the war Here, the reference is to World War II (1941–1945).

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earthen slop jar a large-mouthed, enameled container used indoors at night as a toilet.

folded leaves The reference is to the leaves that Helene has to use instead of toilet paper.

foxtails a stole made of several fox tails linked together.

gabardines trousers made out of gabardine, a sturdy fabric of cotton, wool, or twill.

Gabriel Heatter a radio newscaster.

gal a derogatory term for a black woman; it corresponds to the term "boy" for a black man.

Garret . . . Buttercup brand names of oleomargarine, a substitute for real butter.

"Give me that again. Flat out to fit my head." When Hannah asks Eva if she had ever loved her children, Eva is so stunned by the question that she pretends not to understand. She sarcastically asks Hannah to repeat the question in clearer, simpler terms.

goobers peanuts.

Ham's sons The reference is to Ham, one of Noah's sons. According to the biblical story, which is often used to justify the persecution of blacks, Noah drank so much wine that he passed out, naked. His son Ham, which in Hebrew means dark or swarthy, discovered him and called on his two brothers to cover their father. Averting their faces by walking backwards toward their father, Ham's brothers covered Noah's naked-ness with a cloak. On waking, Noah cursed his son Ham for having seen him while he was naked — nakedness being synonymous with Adam and Eve's Original Sin, according to the Old Testament — and proclaimed that all of Ham's descendants would be slaves. Thus, when the bargeman refers to Ham's sons, he's denigrating all blacks.

head rag a length of cloth, often matching the fabric of a dress, that is bound and tied around the head.

heifer a young cow; here, it is a cutting, insulting term.

[Helene] joined the most conservative black church During slav- ery, blacks usually adopted the Baptist church of the slaveholders, infusing their church with Africanisms. After slavery, in an attempt to distance themselves from the spirited, animated black Baptist churches, upwardly mobile blacks sought spiritual refuge in the more refined and quieter Catholic church. Because there isn't a Catholic church in the Bottom, Helene joins the most conservative black church available.

her nature was coming down The reference is to Sula's first men-strual period.

hunkies a disparaging term for a person, especially a laborer from east-central Europe. Here, it includes all white immigrants.

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iceman . . . icebox People kept perishable items in a wooden icebox that contained large chunks of ice purchased from an iceman.

Jell-Well a gelatin dessert.

keloid scar an abundance of scar tissue, common to black skin that is injured.

Kentucky Wonders a climbing variety of green beans; the ends of the beans are snapped off by hand and then the beans are snapped in half before cooking. People accustomed to this chore soon acquire speed and proficiency and can snap the pods with rhythmic precision, deftly with one hand.

knickers puffy pants that gather just below the knees, exposing the calves.

Liberty magazine a popular magazine of the 1920s and ’30s.

Lindbergh (1902–1974) Nicknamed “Lucky Lindy,” Charles Lindbergh was the heroic American aviator who, in 1927, made the first non-stop solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean. His golden life was tarnished by the brutal kidnapping and murder of his baby son in 1932.

loam a rich mixture of moist soil, clay, and sand.

marcelling irons irons used to create a hairstyle consisting of a series of even waves put in the hair with a hot curling iron.

meal-fried porgies A porgy is a fish; meal-fried means that the fish is fried with a cornmeal coating in hot lard.

milk-dull eyes eyes dull with age and, quite possibly, with cataracts.

mouth organ a metal harmonica, housing a row of free reeds set back in air holes and played by exhaling or inhaling; mouth organs are often used in folk music and sometimes in country-western music.

mulatto a person of mixed black and white ancestry.

Norma Shearer (d. 1983) A famous actress of the 1930s, she won an Academy Award for best actress in 1930 for *The Divorcee.*

Nu Nile a hair product used by blacks.

the number was 522 Playing the numbers was a popular gambling activity. People in the Bottom look for “signs” that tell them which lucky number to play.

Old Dutch Cleanser a widely sold household cleanser in the 1930s.

oui Yes.

pariah anyone despised or rejected by others; a social outcast.

peck . . . two bushels A peck is one-fourth of a bushel, or eight quarts; a bushel is four pecks, or thirty-two quarts.

placket V-shaped, overlapping fabric on a blouse, dress, or skirt; the front of a typical rugby shirt has a placket design at the neck.

postcoital after sexual intercourse.

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private a noncommissioned soldier in the U.S. Army or U.S. Marine Corps whose rank is below a private first-class.

pulling your nose In an effort to make Nel's nose look narrower, sleeker, and more Anglo, Helene tells her to snap a clothespin on it.

read you a dream interpret a dream.

running across a field in France This is a reference to one of many bloody battlefields in France during World War 1 (1914–1918).

Saffron-colored powder . . . cake of oleo The references are to mar- garine, a cheap substitute for butter; it was first introduced as a chalk- -white pliable substance, with the consistency of lard, that was packaged in a plastic bag with a capsule of reddish-yellow dye. When the capsule was squeezed and broken, it released its colored dye, which spread throughout the white margarine. Kneading the plastic bag resulted in a product that eventually resembled butter.

shotgun house a very narrow house that faces the street, each room opening behind it in a straight line into another room, so that if you fired a shotgun in the front door, the bullet would pass through all of the rooms and exit through the back door.

so shocked by the closed coffin At most funerals in the Bottom, cof- fins would be open. However, at the funerals of Hannah and Chicken Little, the coffins are closed because of the bodies' mortification. In each case, the closed coffin is mentioned, indicating that a coffin's being closed was not a common occurrence.

So they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps. evidence of superstitions; both counter-measures are believed, by some people, to ward off evil.

Somebody else ran to Dick's Fresh Food and Sundries to call the ambulance. So few people had telephones in their homes that, in emergencies, one had to go to a place of business in order to use the telephone.

spigot a faucet.

Stepin Fetchit the stage name of Lincoln Theodore Perry (1902–1985), a black comedian famous for playing the buffoon.

stepping tall acting cocky and impertinent.

sucked her teeth a disrespectful sound made by children to show dis- approval of an adult request.

TB Tuberculosis is an infectious disease caused by the tubercle bacillus bacteria and characterized by fever, night sweats, and a productive cough. Also called "consumption," it was one of the leading causes of death in the United States until the 1940s, when drugs were discovered to combat it.

tea roses roses having a scent resembling tea; they were introduced from China to Europe in 1867. In this country, they have been widely hybridized. The Peace rose is probably the most popular tea rose today.

tetter heads here, teenagers whose heads are pocked with eruptions and itching caused by various skin diseases, such as ringworm, psoriasis, herpes, or impetigo.

Tex Ritter the nickname of Woodward Maurice Ritter (1905–1973), a country-western singer.

"That straw'll tickle your pretty neck to death." Before the advent of home freezers, ice was delivered in an ice wagon. The ice was insu- lated using straw, which would slow the ice's melting. The ice wagon driver warns Mrs. Jackson not to eat the ice so fervidly lest she choke on a piece of straw that might be clinging to it.

Tillie the Toiler a popular comic strip character.

Van Van, High John the Conqueror, Little John to Chew, Devil's Shoe String, Chinese Wash, Mustard Seed and the Nine Herbs These are all ingredients used by conjurers to create spells and tell fortunes.

a victorious swagger in the legs of white men Armistice Day is cele- brated annually in November; in Medallion, even though two years have passed since the end of World War I, this military victory is still foremost in the minds of the town's veterans.

the Victrola a record player, powered by a hand crank.

voile sleeves puffed-out sleeves made from a light, transparent-like fabric.

'Voir! Goodbye!

Vrai? Really?

"we float eggs in a crock of vinegar" Submerging hard-boiled eggs in vinegar is one way of pickling them for future use. Sarcastically, Eva is chiding Hannah: There were no eggs available for eating while Hannah was growing up, let alone any available for pickling.

working roots using roots and rites from the occult to gain mystical powers.

wrecked Dorics Morrison likens the white men hanging about the fronts of train stations to the ruins of Doric columns on Greek temples. The men are silent and unmoving, unfunctional and passive watchers.

yonder over there.

"You gone can them?" Eva asks Hannah if she is planning to can the beans. "Canning" is a term used for the storing of cooked fruits and vege-tables in sterilized jars that can be kept indefinitely for future use.

11.8 STUDY QUESTIONS

How is motherhood portrayed in the novel?

The relationship between mother and daughter is often tense in this novel. Rochelle and Helene, Sula and Hannah, and Nel and Helene all experience their own tense

moments. Sula is pained when she hears that her mother does not like her, though she claims to love her. Sula is confined by the strict rule of her mother and Helene is shamed of her mother's employment as a prostitute. What is common about these mother-daughter relationships? How does motherhood change across generations?

Look at the fathers in the novel. What do they have in common? What separates them?

Many of the men in the novel who father children abandon their families. Even those who stick around like Wiley Wright are not wholly present because they are frequently traveling and away from home. The fathers in *Sula* appear to be unified in this absence.

Discuss Sula's birthmark as a symbol in the novel.

Sula's birthmark is said by all to resemble something found in nature. Be it ashes, a snake, or a rose and stem, this characteristic mark on Sula is the subject of frequent remarks. As she grows older, the mark grows darker, and when Sula becomes scorned by society, people begin to see it as a mark of death.

Sula and Nel dig a hole and fill it with stems while playing together. How do you interpret this scene?

The scene is read by some as an example of the two girls coming into sexual maturity. The hole in the earth representing the opening of a woman's sex and the clutter the girls throw into it a representation of all the pre-existing complications that impede a woman's sexuality. The scene is also said to foreshadow the sexual transgression that corrupts Sula and Nel's friendship.

Explain the theme of death and dying in the novel.

Death strikes frequently and suddenly in the novel. It is feared by some characters like Shadrack and sought by others like Tar Baby and Plum. Eva considers it an act of mercy when she gives death to her son Plum.

Why does Morrison begin by describing the destruction of the Bottom?

Morrison sets up expectations in the preface of the novel. By beginning with the destruction of the Bottom, she tells the reader that everything she will describe will soon fall away. The preface explaining the destruction of the Bottom also buffers the harsh introduction to Shadrack's plight.

Why do you think Morrison names the novel after the character Sula?

Sula is the social pariah of the novel. She does not follow societal conventions or traditional roles for women. As the only truly unique character of the novel, she receives the honor of the book's title.

Explain the symbolism of National Suicide Day.

National Suicide Day is founded by Shadrack to confront what he considers the most fearful part of death, its unexpectedness. Suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Shadrack boldly marches down the main road in the Bottom encouraging people to kill themselves or one another. The end of National Suicide Day is symbolic when Shadrack begins to realize the true effects of death and the loneliness it brings.

How does Race affect the characters in the novel?

The Bottom is a town that is segregated from the mostly white town in the Valley. The effects of discrimination and segregation are felt throughout the novel when blacks living in the Bottom are unable to find employment. Explicit violence is enacted against Tar Baby because he is perceived to be a white man living amongst blacks. Both communities disparage racial mixing between white and blacks, and the people of the Bottom consider it a nasty insult when they accuse Sula of sleeping with white men.

Discuss the role that nature plays in the novel.

The people of the Bottom are used to experiencing excesses of nature. They have a plague of robins of pigeons, extreme heat and cold as well as drought and floods. After Jude leaves her, Nel has a feeling of "leaves and mud." Dramatic events in the novel, like Hannah's death, coincide with extreme changes in nature. A windstorm occurs the night before Hannah burns, and an extreme frost covers the Bottom just after Sula's death.

11.9 ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Use passages and characters from the novel to illustrate how Morrison incorporates the principles and ideals of feminism.
2. Do any characters change drastically from the beginning of the novel to its end? If so, which ones? Describe their transformations, citing examples from the text to support your answer.
3. Discuss a decision that a character makes with which you either agree or disagree, and give your reasons.
4. Choose a character that you would like to interview if it were possible. List the questions you would ask that character, and then write the responses that the character might give.
5. Who are two of the most memorable characters in the novel? Give the reasons for each of your choices.
6. Discuss how Nel's grief at the end of the story is, in reality, more for herself than for the death of Sula.

7. Explain the significance of symbols and omens to the development of the novel's plot.
8. Discuss Morrison's use of inverted world order in the novel.
9. Illustrate how the motif of fire and water is threaded throughout the novel.
10. Typical of Morrison's talent is her ability to weave a magical and musical web of language around an incident of horror. List at least five examples from the novel that illustrate this technique.

UNIT 12 THE ASSISTANT -BERNARD MALAMUD

NOTES

Structure

12.0 INTRODUCTION

The Assistant (1957) is Bernard Malamud's second novel. Set in a working-class neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, it explores the situation of first- and second-generation Americans in the early 1950s as experienced by three main characters and the relationships between them: an aging Jewish refugee from the Russian Empire who owns and operates a failing small grocery store, a young Italian American drifter trying to overcome a bad start in life by becoming the grocer's assistant and the grocer's daughter, who becomes romantically involved with her father's assistant despite parental objections and misgivings of her own. It was adapted into a film of the same name in 1997.

12.1 OBJECTIVE

Malamud's fiction is usually organized around moral dilemmas and crises of growth. He combines realism and symbolism, as well as tragedy and comedy, often with the help of mythological and archetypal underpinnings. He employs fantasy that is occasionally supernatural but which more often, as in *The Assistant*, gives realistic happenings a quality of magic and ritual.

12.2 AUTHOR INTRODUCTION

Bernard Malamud was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1914. As a boy, he enjoyed a vigorous and adventurous life in the city streets and parks. His parents, Max and Bertha Fidelman Malamud, ran a neighborhood store, which contributed to

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Malamud's knowledge about the city's ethnic groups. Malamud graduated from Brooklyn's Erasmus Hall High School, a school which drew its students from a variety of ethnic and socio-economic groups. He studied at City College, a long subway ride from Brooklyn to upper Manhattan, where he received his B.A. degree in 1934. In 1942, he received an M.A. degree in English literature from Columbia University, where he had taken courses in 1937 and 1938.

During the Depression, he worked in factories and briefly as a government clerk in Washington, D.C. In the 1940s, he taught evening classes at Erasmus Hall and began writing short stories. In 1945, he married Ann de Chiara, by whom he had two children — Paul in 1947 and Janna in 1952. Malamud has not revealed whether or not he had a strict Jewish upbringing, but it is clear that during his mature years he did not practice Judaism in any formal way though he remained faithful to his sense of a Jewish heritage and identity.

In 1949, during what were painfully lean years for young people who desired to make college teaching a career, Malamud was appointed an instructor of English at Oregon State College (now Oregon State University) at Corvallis. Soon his stories began to appear in leading magazines, and in 1952, his first novel, *The Natural*, was well received, though it became well known only after the success of his next two books: *The Assistant* (1957) and *The Magic Barrel* (1958), a collection of short stories. In 1956, Malamud traveled in Europe and later he used some of his observations there for short stories. In 1959, *The Magic Barrel* received the National Book Award as the best work of fiction published during the preceding year.

In 1961, Malamud published his third novel, *A New Life*, and joined the faculty of Bennington College. Two years later, in 1963, he published *Idiots First*, a second collection of short stories. In 1966, appeared The *Fixer*, his fourth novel, which won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize and became a best seller. In 1969, he added three new stories to the three previously collected tales about the adventures in Italy of the expatriate American painter Arthur Fidelman and issued them all as *Pictures of Fidelman.* In 1971, he published his fifth novel, *The Tenants.*.

From his Jewish background, Malamud derives a bitter humor that often appears in the self-mockery of his characters but it is also forgiving of the self and others. His compassionate poetic sensibility blends with a sense of grace achieved through suffering. Malamud has declared that "All men are Jews," doubtless a metaphor for the universality of alienation, suffering, and the moral compulsion for men to make the very best of their lives within the limitations and ambiguities of human existence. This moral compulsion is a religious task in that it demands an equal labor for the salvation of oneself and others; indeed, one is impossible without the other. Malamud, however, has rarely created specific Jewish social contexts, usually preferring to examine the tensions of Jews adrift in gentile surroundings.

Malamud's first novel, *The Natural*, may seem an unlikely performance from an urban intellectual. It is a sports tale constructed in extraordinarily fantastic, mythological, and supernatural terms. It tells the story of a baseball hero, Roy Hobbs, driven by desire to be the best in the game, basking in the rewards of heroism while oblivious of his duties to others. Roy achieves success through skill and through some sense of sacrifice, but he abandons those people he truly loves for those who promise thrills, success, or glamour, and so he brings doom upon himself and upon those who need his loyalty. The mythological elements of the story include a magic bat, sudden death and resurrection, infertility, and the restoration of lost powers. Finally, however, Roy's long initiation into adulthood finds him lacking in heroic qualities.

In his second novel, *The Assistant*, Malamud returned to the streets of his boyhood and, as if inspired by the need to derive an ultimate moral significance from kinds of suffering he once witnessed, he shows us a young man's successful initiation to the demands and limits of life under oppressive circumstances. The short stories in *The Magic Barrel* (1958) and *Idiots First* (1963) use a variety of modes and material. Malamud writes of cramped but aspiring city life, of painful and sometimes fruitless loyalties between friends, of the failure of imagination and charity in Americans living in Europe, and of the relations between Jews and blacks. His combination of realism and symbolism gives way to supernatural fantasy in "Angel Levine" and "The Jew bird." Tinged with magic and ritual, this combination is best realized in the title story, "The Magic Barrel," surely one of the finest modern American short stories. Here an ascetic young rabbinical student who is about to graduate from seminary pursues a suitable wife with the aid of a quick appearing and disappearing, photograph-bearing, tale-telling marriage broker, only to fall in love with a picture of the marriage broker's disreputable daughter. The story vibrates throughout with the tension between truth and deception.

Between these two collections of stories appeared Malamud's third novel, *A New Life* (1961), displaying traits new and old in Malamud's fiction. The novel's hero, S. Levin, arrives from New York City to be an instructor of freshman composition at an agricultural and technical college in the Pacific Northwest. Levin has pulled himself up from being a drunken wastrel, and now he dreams of creating spiritual awakening among the students and faculty of this so-called cow college. But, as it turns out, it is he who must and does awaken. The novel satirizes the college milieu and also Levin's own bumptiousness, yet Malamud shows a tender regard for the transformation of Levin's egoism and sensualism into a moral heroism. At the novel's end he is about to marry the former wife of a shallow colleague, a woman whose sensibilities he has brought back to life through a love which is now fading. Levin faces a painful future with this woman, her adopted children, and Levin's own child which she carries in her womb, but he accepts the necessity of suffering for others and of laboring to love this woman.

The fact of Levin's Jewishness has little significance to the novel, but the Jewishness of the hero of Malamud's fourth novel, *The Fixer* (1966), is of major

importance. In this novel, Malamud deserts familiar grounds and plunges into early twentieth-century Czarist Russia. The hero of this novel is Yakov Bok, a dispossessed, ordinary, unfortunate, intelligent but uneducated Jewish workman, who breaks out of the ghetto to pose as a gentile so that he may work in areas forbidden to Jews. Falsely accused of the ritual murder of a Christian boy, Bok becomes the center of a massive search for a Jewish scapegoat for the ills of Russia.

The plot unfolds two basic and related themes: the self-deception of the persecutors and the ritual projection of their terrors upon the Jews; and Bok's gradual awareness of what it means to be a Jew. Still very much a religious skeptic, in prison Bok finds his Jewish heritage and identity ever more precious, for his persecutors demand that he confess to a crime he did not commit so they may use his confession for political and anti-Semitic persecutions. His heroic refusal to win freedom through a false confession makes his responsibilities as a Jew equal to his responsibilities as a man. At the novel's end, though Bok remains (like the heroes of *The Assistant* and *A New Life*) in a trapped situation, he has asserted the value of his own life and human life by accepting suffering.

Along with *The Assistant*, *The Fixer* demonstrates Malamud's effective use of the Jew as both an Everyman and as the kind of saint that the extraordinary man can become. Malamud has declared that in writing *The Fixer* he wished to call attention to such large-scale social cruelties as the American treatment of the black man. In *The Tenants* (1971), Malamud returned to New York City, this time using the setting of the 1960s, employing a poetic fervor and a wry humor like those in *The Assistant* and in his New York short stories. *The Tenants* is a tale about two American writers: one, a Jewish novelist blocked in his creative work and lifelessly detached in his personal life; the other, an aspiring black writer, talented and warm hearted, who derives too much of his creative energy from his own hostility and bigotry. As always, Malamud's fiction pleads for a loving recognition of the limitations and promises of human life which can help bridge the manifold alienations within and between men.

12.3 CHARACTERS

MORRIS BOBER

Morris Bober, the protagonist of *The Assistant*, owns a grocery shop, and is portrayed in the novel as being very truthful and having high moral standards, despite the world throwing so any obstacles at him. Many people in the village depend upon his grocery shop for food and supplies, so he is a key character in the community.

IDA BOBER

Ida Bober is married to Morris Bober, and is the mother of Helen Bober. She is very protective of Helen, and constantly stresses about her daughter's relationships.

Ida, like Morris, is a very truthful person, and she also is very gentle and kind towards most of the other characters.

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HELEN BOBER

Helen Bober is the daughter of Morris and Ida. Unlike her parents, Helen's English is very sophisticated, and as a result, wants to become a scholar, but she doesn't have the ability for college. Because of her crushed hope, she starts to view the world in an impractical way, often seeing things different from reality. At the end of the novel, Helen starts to see in a more realistic way, but this is only after she makes multiple mistakes.

FRANK ALPINE

Frank Alpine is a very conflicted character. While he wishes for himself to start doing some good in the community, he is also driven by his tendency to commit bad acts, such as stealing items from the store. He works for Morris, and is Morris' "assistant", and eventually, he starts turning a new leaf. By the end of the novel, Frank has found another way of life for himself.

WARD MINOGUE

Ward Minogue is the main antagonist of the novel. Although his father, Detective Minogue, works with the law, Ward had broken the law multiple times, including stealing from his father's liquor store. Ward's father always punishes him, and eventually kicks him out for doing bad things. He tries to rape Helen at one point, and there are no viable 'good' characteristics about him.

12.4 SUMMARY

The Assistant tells the story of an immigrant grocer, Morris Bober, who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Bober emigrated from Russia in his teenage years and met his wife Ida in New York. Their grocery recently has fallen on hard times because a new store has opened across the street and is taking their customers. To stay afloat, the Bobers also rely upon the wages of their daughter, Helen who works as a secretary.

On the opening day of the novel, two men rob Morris's grocery and knock him unconscious with a blow to the head. Following his injury, a man named Frank Alpine arrives in the neighborhood. Frank has come from a rough life in the West to start again. When Morris re-opens the store, Frank appears each morning to help him drag in the heavy milk crates. Eventually, Frank asks if Morris would let Frank work for free so that Frank could learn the trade. Morris says no and Frank disappears. Soon after Morris observes that a quart of milk and two rolls are stolen from his deliveries each morning. After a week, Morris alerts the police because he cannot find the culprit. On the next day, Morris finds Frank Alpine sleeping in his cellar. Frank admits to stealing the milk and bread out of hunger.

Morris feeds Frank and lets him sleep in the grocery for the night. The next morning, Morris slips while dragging in the milk and passes out. Frank rescues him then puts on the grocer's apron and starts working in the store.

During the two weeks that Morris recovers, Frank manages to bring in much more money than Morris had done. When Morris returns, Frank moves upstairs to a small room off an apartment that an Italian couple, the Fusos, rent. Because business is so successful, Morris eventually wants to pay Frank. Frank feels guilty about being paid because unknown to the grocer, Frank has been stealing money. Furthermore, it was he and Ward Minogue, a boy whose father is a local detective, who had robbed the grocery.

Frank becomes interested in Helen Bober. Helen recently lost her virginity to Nat Pearl a local Jewish boy whose parents own a candy store and who is attending Law School, but she shunned him after learning that he only wanted sex. The other local Jewish boy on the street, Louis Karp, suggests that Helen marry him, but she is not interested. Frank courts Helen by meeting her at the library, which she visits twice a week. Eventually, they start spending a lot of time together and even kiss. When Frank suggests that they touch more, Helen tells him that she cannot have sex with someone unless she is sure that she loves him. Frank tries to control his urges.

Morris Bober enjoys working with Frank and the two men tell stories to each other during the day. One day, Morris starts to suspect Frank of stealing because revenues do not equal what Morris thinks that they should be. He starts watching Frank closely. Frank, at the same time, is overcome by his guilty conscience and decides to repay all the money he has stolen. He places six dollars back in the register one day, but when he realizes that he will need some money for that night, he steals a dollar back. Morris catches him and is heartbroken. Still, he orders Frank to leave.

The same night, Helen goes to meet Frank late in the park. She has decided that she loves him and will have sex with him. When she gets to the park, a drunk Ward Minogue, whom she knows from primary school, tries to rape her. Frank appears and rescues her, but proceeds to rape her himself.

The following day, Morris Bober falls asleep in his apartment with the radiator unlit, flooding his rooms with gas and almost killing himself. Frank and Nick Fuso save him. Morris contracts pneumonia and has to go to the hospital. Frank keeps the store open for the weeks when Morris is sick. Business is terrible because two Norwegians have just reopened the competing grocery and all the customers have gone there. Frank gives all of his personal savings to the grocery and works all night long at a different job to keep it afloat. Still, when Morris returns to the shop he makes Frank leave. Morris himself then tries to save the business by finding another job, but he cannot. A mysterious man appears one night offering to burn the store down so that Morris can collect the insurance money, but Morris turns him down. Later Morris tries to light such a fire himself, but nearly burns himself to death before Frank appears and rescues him. Morris again orders Frank out.

One night, Ward Minogue, who has been diagnosed with diabetes and who is acting desperately, sneaks into the Karp's liquor store through a broken back window. After getting drunk, Ward accidentally sets the store on fire. Karp's store and building are ruined. The next day, Karp, who has insurance, offers to buy Morris's store and grocery so that he can reopen. Morris feels happy and goes out to shovel snow for the pedestrians, although he fails to wear his coat. Later that night, he falls sick and dies three days later from pneumonia.

After Morris's death, Frank Alpine starts running the store. He works all night at a different job and tries everything to make the store work, but times are tough. Still, he decides that he wants to pay for Helen to attend college. At the end of the book, Helen has become friendlier to Frank and seems ready to accept his offer of tuition. Frank himself has changed utterly becoming completely honest and very much like Morris Bober, whose store and philosophies he now embraces. In his final act, Frank Alpine goes to the hospital, has himself circumcised and after Passover becomes a Jew.

12.5 THEMES

FATHER AND SON RELATIONSHIPS

Four father-son relationships exist in *The Assistant,* three biological and one created. The created relationship exists between Morris Bober and Frank Alpine. Morris's biological son, Ephraim, died at a young age, but Frank arrives to learn Morris's trade and philosophy. Frank will be the one to inherit the grocery when Morris dies, which a son would normally do. The other sons and fathers demonstrate the difficult nature of passing on one's ethics and values to one's child. Jeffrey Helterman proposes that Malamud's presentation of four-father son relationships evokes the tradition of evoking four kinds of sons during the Passover Seder: the wise son (Nat Pearl), the wicked son (Ward Minogue), the foolish son (Louis Karp), and the son who has wits not to ask (Frank Alpine). Frank eventually does learn to ask the right questions and in doing so becomes more of a son to Morris Bober than the other sons are to their fathers. The way that these various relationships are explored in the novel touches on the relative difficulty of passing a historical legacy from father to son, as well as one's philosophy of system of laws.

TRANSCENDENCE OF ONE'S SELF

Frank Alpine spends the novel learning to transcend the ignoble desires of his self and learn to be a good person. Frank's general tendencies, as exhibited in the beginning of the novel, lean toward dishonesty and lust for Helen. He desires to become like Saint Francis, a model of goodness, but it is only through a fierce struggle that he is able to do so. Morris Bober is a person who has learned how to transcend his self and proceed with grace. Morris Bober fully accepts the idea of

suffering. He sees that it is necessary to his self and the world. Through his acceptance, Morris is able to transcend the imprisoning effect of his suffering and liberate his self. Frank Alpine's eventual transformation in the novel allows his to achieve similar spiritual freedom.

STRUGGLE FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM

All of the characters in the novel are either immigrants or the children of immigrants. In the belly of New York City, they all struggle for the American Dream. Malamud suggests that this struggle is difficult, but also acknowledges its possibilities. Some immigrants, like Julius Karp, have managed to become rich. Although Julius is not an honorable person, his economic success came in part from his own hard work and his willingness to take advantage of the opportunities before his eyes. Nat Pearl represents another success story in the community. Although his parents still speak Yiddish, he managed to attend Columbia and now attends Law School. While there are these successes, there are also many difficulties. The Bobers barely subsist even though they own their own business. Carl, the Swedish painter, has children who appear to be constantly hungry. Even the tendency for customers to leave the Bobers' store for better prices seems reasonable given their economic struggle. Malamud exposes the possibility of realizing the American Dream as a new immigrant, but also its harsh reality by exposing the lives in an immigrant community in Brooklyn.

THE COST OF INDECISIVENESS

Frank learns too late Dostoyevsky's lesson about how one simple act can pollute an entire existence. By the time he has forged his friendship Helen, the consequences his decision-making process have already doomed him to a life of isolation loneliness.

THE VALUE OF ETHICS

Materialism is constantly placed in contrast with the decisions to put selfishness aside and act with ethical intent even if the cost is success measure by wealth. To be good and decent is the ultimate measure of a successful life, not the possessions one accumulates or the money one earns.

THE PERVASIVE EFFECTS OF PREJUDICE

The effects of prejudice allowed to build up and mutate like a virus is felt everywhere in the novel. The Jews and Gentiles both operate within a never-ending atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion that insinuates itself into every social transaction and become a guiding force behind every decision involving the object of prejudice.

FATE AND FREE WILL

An underlying theme that is not directly addressed through incident or contemplation is the question of what extent fate is guided by forces out of one's control and

what, if any, chance human beings have to express genuine free will. An atmosphere of resignation to the acceptance that one's fate is predominantly out of one's control runs through nearly every character. The fact that none of them confront this feeling directly and that those who do seem to change their fate still feel like pawns of destiny says much about the modern experience.

12.6 MOTIFS

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Saint Francis of Assisi reappears throughout the novel mostly when Frank Alpine discusses him. When Frank was an orphan, the priest used to read portions of Saint Francis's book *Saint Francis's Little Flowers* to the boys. Frank always longed to achieve the goodness that Saint Francis embodied. The constant reappearance of Saint Francis in the text, or through the images of flowers and birds, constantly reminds Frank of his desire to be good, even though he continues to always do wrong. Saint Francis also was an eclectic monk who preached that poverty was the way to reach God and was Christ's true message. The Catholic Church of his time considered Saint Francis's ideas incorrect and dangerous, since their ability to collect funds from their parishes kept them rich. Morris Bober, however, shares Saint Francis's perspective and accepts his impoverishment as a way that he has remained spiritually afresh. Eventually, Frank Alpine will come to accept impoverishment as well and despite living in it, will be able to spiritually transform.

PRISON

The idea that the grocery where the Bobers' work is a prison occurs often throughout the novel. Helen Bober always thinks of her home as a prison and once even dreams of it as such. The merchants who find Frank Alpine working in the shop warn him to leave or he will get stuck there too, in a prison-like death tomb. The idea of prison relates to Malamud's discussion of suffering and redemption. When asked about the prison motif in his work, Malamud once stated, "I use it as a metaphor for the dilemma of all men: necessity, whose bare we look through and try not to see. Social injustice, apathy, ignorance. The personal prison of entrapment in past experience, guilt, obsession the somewhat blind or blinded self. A man has to construct, invent his freedom." Within *The Assistant,* the only character who does not think of the grocery as a prison is Morris Bober. Although he is not happy there, he has come to accept the grocery store and he also does not see it as the sole factor imprisoning him in his life. As Frank Alpine changes, he will willingly come to live in the prison of the grocery despite everyone's warnings. His doing so is possible because his changed self as altered the nature of his imprisonment, as his soul has been freed.

YIDDISH LANGUAGE

Phrases and words from the Yiddish Language dominate the way that Morris and Ida Bober speak. Malamud emphasizes their native language by placing Yiddish words directly in the text such as: "landsleit" (countrymen), "parnusseh" (livelihood), and "gesheft" (business). The use of Anglicized Yiddish terms also demonstrates their native language, such as the Polish woman being a "Poilisheh," the Italian tenant being an "Italyener," and the possible robbers being "holdupnicks." Most importantly, Malamud directly translates from the Yiddish into the English, with the parts of speech not appearing in their normal American locations. For example, Ida's inquiry of Morris, "You said to him something not nice," might normally be expressed in American English as, "You said something not nice to him?" The Yiddish phrasing helps to ground the characters' ethnic backgrounds. It also plays an important textual role in indicating Frank Alpine's evolution. Toward the end of the novel, Frank too occasionally thinks in Yiddish phrasings, indicating his full embrace of Morris Bober's philosophy.

12.7 SYMBOLS

FLOWERS

Flowers reappear throughout the text as a symbol related to the motif of Saint Francis of Assisi. Helen's naked behind is compared to a flower; Frank dreams of Helen throwing him a flower; Frank carves Helen a wooden flower; and Helen tosses a flower into her father's grave. Real flowers represent the realization of pure love that characterized Saint Francis. For most of the book, Helen and Frank are not able to love one another. The symbol of the wooden flower shows Frank's desire to love Helen, but also his inability to transcend a concrete image of what this love would equal and fully embrace it. At the end of the novel when Saint Francis transforms Frank's wooden flower into a real one, his love has become fully realized and pure.

THE NOVELS FRANK READS

After learning that Frank wants to go to college, Helen makes Frank read Anna Karenina,*Madame Bovary,* and *Crime and Punishment.* Helen's desire that Frank read these books highlights her desire to transform him into something that she wants him to be. Helen is beginning to fall in love with him, but not with who he truly is, but with the man she believes she can make him into. On one level, these books suggest Helen's inability to properly love. On the level of text, the books all contain plots that mirror Frank Alpine's own struggle. In all of the novels, the main characters commit a "crime" that changes their entire life: both Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary have affairs; and Raskolnikov commits a murder. Given Frank's guilty conscience, these books all make him consider whether or not he will be

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able to redeem himself in the future. Ironically, although Helen gave Frank the books, she barely understands them herself and as the novel continues she is not able to forgive Frank even though he committed a crime just like her revered heroes and heroines.

MILK AND BREAD

Morris Bober receives crates of milk each morning from the deliverymen, which sit outside his door until he drags them in. He also receives two bags of rolls that he sells throughout the day. This milk and this bread symbolize Morris's importance as a sustainer of the community. These two products provide physical nourishment for the neighborhood. When Frank Alpine is starving and sleeping in the basement, he survives alone on milk and rolls. Morris's tendency to sell products that support his customers is consistent with his status as a moral supporter for the community. While Julius Karp makes much more money by trading in alcohol, Morris Bober is content to sell people health and nourishment through his marketing of these more wholesome goods.

12.8 GLOSSARY

Der oilem iz a goilem (paffly Hebrew): The populace are dopes, the people is a dummy.

Feh: an exclamation of disgust.

Gelt: money

gesheft :business establishment.

Gink: (American big city slang) guy, fellow, odd person.

gotten yu: My God!, help!

Goyim: non-Jewish person.

Italyener: Italian person.

Landsleit: person from the same old-world local Jewish community or *shtetl*.

Parnusseh: wages, source of income, or way of making a living.

Pisher: literal, one who urinates; figurative, a little or slight person, an inexperienced person, or something that adds up to little.

Poilisheh: Polish person.

Schmerz: a blow.

Schnapps: hard liquor.

Schwer: literal, heavy; figurative, difficult, painful.

Shikse: a female non-Jew.

Shlimozel: person for whom nothing goes right; an unlucky person, a born loser.

Yaskadal v'yiskadash shmey, rabo. B'olmo divre . . . (Hebrew): The first words of the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead: "Magnified and sanctified be His great name in the world which He has created according [to His will]."

12.9 STUDY QUESTIONS

Discuss the importance of Saint Francis of Assisi in the text.

Saint Francis of Assisi represents the idea of pure goodness and love, which Frank Alpine is trying to obtain throughout the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Frank explains that Saint Francis is so innately good, that he makes Frank want to cry. Try as he might, however, Frank cannot act good most of the time. Frank's actions are characterized by dishonesty. Although he comes to the grocery to help Morris Bober, he ends up stealing from him. Although Frank feels genuine affection for Helen, his pursuit of her is governed by his lust. Frank struggles with his desires, but it is not until he is exposed as a dishonest fraud that Frank is able to take the necessary steps to sincerely become good.

Saint Francis also testifies to one's ability to live a satisfied life even in the midst of impoverishment. As a monk in the Catholic Church, Saint Francis took the then unusual step of adhering to a life of poverty himself. The Catholic Church previously had been dominated by the accumulation of money and Saint Francis's suggestion that poverty represented the path to God and Christ's true vision was greatly disapproved of by his peers. The poor immigrant community where the Bobers live is an environment where most people sense that their impoverishment brings pain and suffering. Only Morris Bober is able to feel a sense of gratitude and peace within an impoverished state, seeing their situation as others do not. By the end of the book, Frank will be embrace a life of perpetual poverty like Saint Francis and Morris Bober, but will also have found inner peace.

Morris Bober and Julius Karp are Jewish merchants on the same block. Discuss the similarities and differences between the two men.

Morris Bober and Julius Karp are both Yiddish immigrants from Europe, but Morris is characterized by generosity and honesty, while Karp is characterized by self-interest. Karp plays an important role in the novel because many of his self-serving actions are what drive forward the plot. Karp's leasing of the other store to a grocer, for example, initiates Morris's period of extreme economic struggle. Karp's flight from the possible robbers, results in Morris being robbed himself.

Karp wants to remain friends with Morris because he wants to remain under the favor of Morris's sincere goodness, however Karp himself does not act with goodness. Eventually, Karp even comes to reveal a lengthy plan through which he will be able to control part of Morris's grocery, by having his son Louis marry Helen Bober. With the plan, Karp preys upon the economic disadvantages of the Bobers for his own gain. In doing so, he reveals that he is a cold, calculating figure.

While Morris is the more honest one, Karp is the more successful one and this fact suggests the irony of struggling within the American capitalist system. The good will not always succeed

Why does Helen Bober want to go out with Nat Pearl? What does he represent for her? Why does she ultimately reject him?

At the beginning of the novel, Helen is a character very interested in a person's status and abilities. Nat Pearl is the one person in her impoverished community who will have a life outside of their current circumstances. With his college degree and future life as an attorney, Nat Pearl has the promise of making money and obtaining respect from American society. Helen initially falls in love with Nat because she is attracted to his ability to leave the painful and prison-like neighborhood in which they currently dwell. For much of the novel, Helen tries to ignore Nat, as she believes that he only used her for sex. After the death of her father, she returns to him for a while, probably due to her emotional distress, but eventually rejects him again. Toward the end of the book, Helen learns to truly love people for their self and not for what they represent. For this reason, she turns back toward Frank Alpine, whose character has become more honorable than Nat Pearl's.

12.10 SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

- The novel exposes both immigrants and their children as they strive for the American dream. In what do the children of the immigrants exercise their privileges differently from their parents. How has been born in American affected them
- Discuss the character of Ida Bober. Is she presented in a sympathetic or unsympathetic light? What is her importance in the novel's plot?
- Helen Bober lends Frank Alpine copies of *Anna Karenina,Crime and Punishment,* and *Madame Bovery.* How do the plots of these novels relate to that of the *Assistant*?
- Bernard Malamud offers numerous reflections upon the nature of Judaism. Using references from the text, discuss Malamud's perspective on Judaism and discuss how it differs or is similar to other opinions on the religion.
- The Bober's deceased son, Ephraim, is mentioned several times in the text. Discuss his significance in relationship to the character of Morris Bober.
- *The Assistant* takes place in an immigrant community. Examine the speech patterns of five different characters from this community with attention to what their speech indicates about their ethnicity and level of education.
- Compare the attitudes of Morris, Ida, and Helen toward gentiles.
- Trace the stages by which Frank changes his attitude toward Jews.

- Discuss various reasons why Frank begins and continues to steal from Morris.
- Discuss how Malamud creates the atmosphere of the Bobers' neighborhood and of the store.
- Compare Louis Karp and Nat Pearl as prospective suitors for Helen. Account for Helen's feeling that she might respond to Nat if he offered marriage.
- Compare the effects of character and chance on Morris Bober's misfortunes.
- How does Frank resemble St. Francis?
- How does Malamud use the Polish woman, Mike Papadopolous, and Carl Johnson to characterize Morris?
- Compare the sexual attitudes of Helen, Frank, Nat, and Ward.
- Discuss the images of entrapment throughout the novel.
- Discuss the use of alter egos (sometimes called psychological doubles) throughout the novel.
- Discuss the function of Frank's spying on Helen in the bathroom, both early and late in the novel.
- Compare all the father-son relationships in the novel.
- Characterize Helen's relations to her mother and father.
- Why are Ida and Morris so sarcastic with each other?
- Discuss the reasons for, and trace the course of, Frank's desire to confess the holdup to Morris.
- What is the function of dreams throughout the novel?
- Trace the theme of betrayal throughout the novel.
- Investigate Frank's reasons for becoming a Jew.

UNIT 13 NATIVE SON - RICHARD WRIGHT

Structure

13.0 INTRODUCTION

Native Son (1939) is a novel written by the American author Richard Wright. It tells the story of 20-year-old Bigger Thomas, a black youth living in utter poverty in a poor area on Chicago's South Side in the 1930s. While not apologizing for Bigger's crimes, Wright portrays a systemic inevitability behind them. Bigger's lawyer, Boris Max, makes the case that there is no escape from this destiny for his client or any other black American since they are the necessary product of the society that formed them and told them since birth who exactly they were supposed to be. "Native Son" is a groundbreaking novel written by Richard Wright and published in 1940. The book has won several awards since its release and has been adapted into many different formats including plays and feature films.

"No American Negro exists", James Baldwin once wrote, "who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull." Frantz Fanon discusses the feeling in his 1952 essay, *L'expérience vécue du noir* (*The Fact of Blackness*). "In the end", writes Fanon, "Bigger Thomas acts. To put an end to his tension, he acts, he responds to the world's anticipation." The book was a successful and groundbreaking best seller. However, it was also criticized by Baldwin and others as ultimately advancing Bigger as a stereotype, not a real character.

13.1 OBJECTIVE

The book is one of the first American books to explore the topics of race relations and the oppression and segregation that black people face in their daily lives. Analyze the author's development of the themes while summarizing the story.

Examine the story structure, particularly in regards to the beginning and ending, and how these elements contribute to the ironic conclusion of the story.

13.2 AUTHOR INTRODUCTION

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“Words can be weapons against injustice,” wrote Richard Wright. These words are evidenced by Wright’s own career as a successful black writer emerging during a period of racial oppression and economic hardship. Born September 4, 1908 on a plantation in Roxie, Mississippi, Wright came into a family embedded in the Southern tradition. His grandfather had been a slave, and his father was an illiterate sharecropper and mill worker. At the age of six, Wright’s father abandoned the family, leaving Wright and his younger brother by two years, Leon, under the sole care of his mother Ella who was a schoolteacher at the time. Moving to Memphis, Tennessee, where Ella took a job as a cook, Wright and his family lived in extreme poverty. His mother felt it necessary to move from community to community; Wright thus attended school sporadically. In the meantime, he also stayed at the homes of various relatives in Arkansas and Mississippi, working various small part-time jobs. With his meager earnings, he managed to buy magazines, dime novels, old schoolbooks? Despite his lack of formal education, Wright read voraciously.

In 1920, Wright was sent to his grandmother’s house in Jackson where he enrolled in high school. As a naturally gifted child and fast learner, he graduated from high school as the valedictorian. After graduation, he worked in Memphis for a short time before moving to Chicago in 1927, where Wright was subjected to the Jim Crow segregation laws in his jobs as a postal worker and a hospital orderly. But Wright found escape through the Communist Party. In 1933, Wright was invited to attend a meeting of the John Reed Club? a club that served as one of the “cultural instruments” of the Party. Intrigued by what he called “an organized search for the truth of the lives of the oppressed and the isolated,” Wright began to compose poetry as a form of propaganda, attempting to humanize Communism. He was soon promoted to Executive Secretary of the John Reed Club and surrounded himself with a group of leftist writers. When the Communist party dissolved the club, Wright was among the first to sign up for the American Writers? Congress, a literary organization that was controlled by the Communist Party. It was also around this time that he married Rose Dimah Meadman.

In 1935, Wright completed his first novel, Cesspool (published post-posthumously under the title Lawd Today). He also began to publish other works of poetry and short stories. Wright moved to Harlem, New York, in 1937 where he kept himself busy writing articles for various journals and publication as well as his first published book, Uncle Tom’s Children. The novel was finished in 1938 and consisted of a collection of novellas about racial oppression in the South. After being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, Wright moved to Brooklyn where he was able to finish what is considered one of the most defining works of his career: Native Son. Native Son sold over 200,000 in less than a month and put

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Wright on the map of twentieth century literati. With its vivid portrayal of slum conditions in the South as well as an intense sociological study, Wright became considered a master of the psychological suspense narrative. The novel was soon adapted into a stage drama with the collaboration of Paul Green. Under the direction of the infamous Orson Welles, Native Son ran successfully on Broadway for three years. By this time, Wright had divorced Rose and married Ellen Poplar - a descendant of Polish Jewish immigrants and a fellow leftist - with whom he had two daughters.

His second book, Black Boy, became an instant success when it was published in 1945, making his first two books his most successful. By now, Wright had fallen out with the Communist Party, becoming disillusioned with their ideological rigidity. With the money from his literary career, Wright began to travel around Europe, finally moving with his family to France in 1947. There he became interested in the anti-colonialist movement and associated himself with several other successful thinkers, including Jean-Paul Stare, Simone Beauvoir, Gertrude Stein, George Plimpton, and Leopold Senghor. But after completing several other works, Wright began to distance himself from his associates due to his poor health and financial difficulties. During his last years, he composed several works of poetry in the haiku form. On November 28, 1961, Richard Wright died of a heart attack at the age of 52 and was buried in Paris. Other works by Richard Wright include: The Negro and Parkway Community House (1941), The Outsider (1955), Savage Holiday (1954), White Man, Listen! (1957), The Long Dream (1958), The Eight Men (1961).

13.3 CHARACTERS

BIGGER THOMAS

The protagonist of the novel, Bigger Thomas is twenty years old, living in one of the many slum apartments of Chicago's predominantly-black South Side. The rough conditions of South Side life are dramatized at the beginning of the novel when Bigger is roused awake by his mother and younger siblings so that he might kill a yellow-fanged rat. Bigger's anger and pride alternate to determine much of the novels beginning. While Bigger is willing to brutalize his fellow gang members, his killing of the multi-millionaire heiress, Mary Dalton, is purely accidental. Midway through the novel, Bigger's rape/murder of his girlfriend, Bessie Mears, seals his fate and he is soon apprehended by the authorities. The flight motif, developed during Book Two, hearkens back to the rat that Bigger kills in the opening scene and by the novel's end, Bigger's fate is equally grim. Doomed to the electric chair, Bigger's lot in the judicial system is little improved despite the assistance of the Communist "Public Defenders." Nonetheless, the defense attorney, Boris A. Max, is on hand during Bigger's final hours, assisting him in his final struggle to find worth in his existence.

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JAN ERLONE

A young communist, Jan is the boyfriend of Mary Dalton. His idealism is naïve to a fault; often times, Jan's orthodoxy and reliance upon images and "symbols" get in the way of his well-meaning attempts to produce a real change. Jan's idealism is nearly shattered in the wake of Mary's murder, but he comes to a facile understanding of Bigger's crime, purely in terms of Communism and racist poverty. In the end, Jan commissions his friend, Boris Max, to defend Bigger.

BESSIE MEARS

Bessie is Bigger's alcoholic girlfriend. She is reluctantly dragged into Bigger's criminal activity and Bigger ultimately rapes and kills her. Throughout her interactions with Bigger, Bessie is frightened and her attempts at a seductive beauty are fairly transparent. Despite her alcoholism and general apathy, Bessie is prophetic when she warns Bigger that his violent crimes will inevitably cost him his life.

"MA" THOMAS

The mother of Bigger, Buddy and Vera, "Ma" is increasingly unable to support her family and she relies upon Bigger to help put food on the table. From the beginning of the novel, Ma is clearly concerned that Bigger's gang involvement is prevented him from finding a respectable job that will allow him to provide for his family. When Ma faces the prospect of her oldest son's execution, she relies upon her religious beliefs as the only consolation.

DAVID BUCKLEY

The State Attorney who prosecutes Bigger for the murders of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears. Buckley is a racist, bloodthirsty politician and his re-election relies upon Bigger's conviction and execution. Throughout Bigger's trial, Buckley fashions his rhetoric to appeal to the emotions of the violent white mob, hoping to intimidate the defense.

MR. HENRY DALTON

The millionaire landlord and father of the murdered Mary Dalton. Mr. Dalton hires Bigger as a chauffeur, hours before Bigger kills Mary. Mr. Dalton is also Bigger's landlord, part-owner of the South Side Real Estate Company. Despite Mr. Dalton's philanthropy to the NAACP, it becomes clear that he has little understanding of racism and poverty.

MARY DALTON

The daughter and heiress of the Daltons. Mary is both a Communist-sympathizer and a truant. After spending an evening with her boyfriend Jan, Mary passes out in a drunken stupor. In a rather convoluted, compromising scene, Bigger accidentally kills Mary, suffocating her with a pillow. After this, Bigger decapitates Mary and burns her body in the basement furnace.

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MRS. DALTON

The wife of Henry Dalton and mother of Mary, Mrs. Dalton is physically blind. The wealth of the Dalton family is largely hers and Mrs. Dalton is responsible for much of Mr. Dalton's philanthropy. She is unstinting in her support for the NAACP and she hopes that Bigger, like her previous chauffeur, will consider going to night school. Despite her genuine sympathy for Bigger's mother, the horror of Bigger's crime renders Mrs. Dalton unable to defend the boy.

BORIS A. MAX

Serving as the Public Defender on Bigger's behalf, "Mr. Max" comes under attack mainly because he is a Communist as well as a Jew. From his own experiences, Max is better able to understand Bigger in comparison to the other characters. Nonetheless, Max is initially motivated to defend Bigger for purely political reasons. He ultimately comes to "see" Bigger as an individual and their relationship at the novel's end is the closest that Bigger ever comes to sharing himself with another person.

VERA THOMAS

Bigger's younger sister, Vera faints at the sight of the dead rat. In contrast to her older brother, Vera is enrolled in sewing classes at the YWCA, but she drops out after Bigger's arrest because of her classmates' teasing.

BRITTEN

A private detective hired by Mr. Dalton soon after Mary is murdered. Britten's racism, anti-Semitism and fear of Communists, prevent him from properly understanding what has happened. Throughout his investigations, Britten is unswerving in his conviction that Bigger is a Communist spy.

DOC

An older black man, Doc owns the South Side pool hall where Bigger hangs out with his friends Gus, GH and Jack. At the end of one of his violent outbreaks, Bigger cuts a gash into the felt of a billiard table. After this, Doc forbids him to return, effectively ending his membership in the gang.

GH, GUS AND JACK

GH, Gus and Jack are Bigger's fellow gang members who plan to rob Blum's deli at the beginning of the novel. After Bigger attacks Gus, the Blum heist is called off. When Bigger takes the job as the Dalton's chauffeur, they are impressed with his new-found wealth. When Bigger's friends visit him in his prison cell, they assure him that they will take care of his mother.

REVEREND HAMMOND

At Ma's request, Reverend Hammond visits Bigger in prison. He offers Bigger a wooden cross but Bigger throws it away, fearing it as a trick when he sees the larger, flaming cross of the KKK. Hammond plays the role of a "holy fool," and his syrupy sermons, told in a southern drawl, fail to win Bigger's soul.

PEGGY

The Irish maid of the Daltons, who considers herself to be a member of the family. She is patronizing in her treatment of Bigger and she tricks him into performing her furnace chores.

BUDDY

Bigger's younger brother. He admires Bigger's boldness, covering his brother's tracks when he discovers Mary's purse. Even after he finds that Bigger has deceived him, Buddy remains loyal to his older brother. In comparison, Buddy is the more sensible, deferential brother and son.

13.4 SUMMARY

Native Son is divided into three books entitled Fear, Flight and Fate, depicting the final days of Bigger Thomas. The story is set in the Depression-era and Bigger is the novel's twenty-year-old protagonist, a resident of the "Black Belt," a Chicago ghetto that is predominantly black. Bigger lives in a one-room apartment with his mother ("Ma") and younger siblings, Vera and Buddy. The depressing mood of the novel is set in the opening scene: Bigger is awakened by the screams of his sister and mother. An overgrown, yellow-fanged rat is prowling around the room. Bigger and his brother back the rat into a corner and as the rat strikes back, tearing a gash in Bigger's pants, Bigger strikes the rat dead, crushing its head with a heavy iron skillet.

Bigger's life is miserable and after a stint in a reform school, he remains bitter and angry about poverty and racism. Bigger's dream is to become an aviator but instead he is given a job through the relief agency-a chauffeur for a white millionaire-philanthropist named Henry Dalton. Ma warns Bigger to avoid his gang and set aside his criminal habits, lest he end up in the "gallows." Ma is unable to relate to Bigger and he is unresponsive to her religiosity and her overtures on "manhood." When Ma asserts that Bigger would go out and get a job if he "had any manhood in him," Bigger resents his mother for her dependence upon him. While he sincerely cares about his family, Bigger knows that he will never be offered the type of job that would allow him to offer his family substantial support.

Despite Ma's prophetic warning, Bigger goes to Doc's pool hall to meet his gang and he suggests that they rob Blum's Deli. Bigger is inwardly afraid to rob Blum and so he projects his fear onto Gus, another member of the gang, hoping

that the argument will prevent the gang from organizing themselves to attempt the heist. Bigger suggests the robbery because he wants to appear tough but when Gus calls his bluff, Bigger gets angry and pulls a knife. The stir that Bigger causes does more than prevent the gang from robbing Blum's; Bigger's raucous behavior gets him thrown out of Doc's pool hall. Bigger slowly comes to understand that since the pool hall is the "hang-out" spot of the gang, he will no longer be able to participate especially considering the fact that none of his friends were willing to defend his violent behavior.

After he is effectively "kicked out" of the gang, Bigger struggles to clear his head of angry thoughts as he prepares for the interview at Mr. Dalton's mansion. Bigger is not excited about taking the job from the relief agency, but he is stunned by the wealth of the Dalton home and even if the employment is not the greatest, Bigger realizes that his opportunities are scant 'now that he no longer has his gang.

Bigger fumbles the interview and is frightened by everything and everyone in the house: the booming grandfather clock; Mr. Dalton's blind wife; the stereotypical Irish maid, Peggy; and Dalton's blond daughter, Mary. Bigger remembers seeing Mary in a newsreel from a movie early in the day. The newsreel featured a story detailing the winter vacation of the millionaire heiress. Apparently, she skipped class and took her boyfriend, Jan Erlone, to Florida. As it turns out, Jan Erlone is a Communist and Mary, for all of her wealth and conservative upbringing, is a Communist sympathizer.

Upon meeting Bigger, Mary asks him if he is unionized and Bigger simply does not understand Mary's politics. He does see the consternation on Mr. Dalton's face though and he is afraid that Mary's argument will cost him his job before he has it. After Bigger is hired, his first assignment is to drive Mary to her evening lectures at the university. Instead of going to school, Mary has Bigger take a detour to pick up her boyfriend, Jan Erlone, a member of the Communist party. Bigger is uncomfortable with the two patronizing whites and he is asked to take them to a "joint" in the South Side where they "experience" black life by getting drunk and eating fried chicken at Charlie's Kitchen Shack. Bigger is only increasingly hostile, offended and worried when Mary has drunkenly passed out in the car and he has little option but to carry her into the house and upstairs to her bedroom. Mrs. Dalton enters the room and Bigger panics, accidentally suffocating Mary with a pillow that he put over her face so that her drunken moans would not arouse the attention of the blind woman. After Bigger realizes that Mary is dead, he takes her body to the basement. In a frenzy, he decapitates the body and burns it in the furnace.

The next day, Bigger tries to cover his tracks but he is clumsy and rather than taking the opportunity to leave town with the money that was in Mary's purse, Bigger drags his girlfriend Bessie Mears into his plot to fabricate a ransom note signed "Reds," hoping that the Daltons will believe that the Communists have her daughter. Bigger expects to net $10,000 in this manner. His convoluted plot quickly unravels after the ash of Mary's body is found in the furnace. Suddenly,

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Bigger is on the run. Bessie is horrified when she learns that Bigger has murdered Mary Dalton and she is frightened by the gruesome details of the crime. Bessie is sure that Bigger is a changed person and by the end of the night, Bigger rapes and kills her, bludgeoning her in the head with a brick.

The following day, all of the newspapers and police authorities are well attuned to the story of the dead heiress and the "Negro murderer/rapist," for Bigger is sure to be the murderer and rapist of Mary Dalton. A white vigilante mob has formed, thousands of private citizens invading black neighborhoods to terrorize homes. Another vigilante mob has formed to assist the five thousand police officers who were deployed into the Black Belt to track Bigger Thomas down. Starting from one end of the Black Belt and progressing rapidly, the police and adjunct mob easily track Bigger to the roof of a dilapidated building. Bigger is violent and he wounds several of the officers before he is finally brought down and savagely beaten.

Bigger wakes up in a prison, to discover that he is has been severely injured and he faints at the inquest. He is on trial for a litany of offenses as the police have easily tracked down the body of Bessie Mears, who did not die from Bigger's brick-blows. After Bigger threw her body down an air-shaft, Bessie managed to crawl away but she died of hypothermia, freezing to death. Ma visits Bigger in prison and urges him, with the exhortations of Reverend Hammond, to devote his soul to God, for surely there was nothing left for him. Bigger knows that he is going to die in the electric chair and the State Attorney, David Buckley, obtains a signed confession from Bigger even though there is more than enough evidence to convict Bigger.

Jan Erlone is hurt by Bigger's crime and also insulted that Bigger tried to pin the crimes on him, but Jan overcomes his feelings of hate and repulsion and sees the opportunity to further devote himself to his ideals. Jan visits Bigger and urges him to accept the legal aid of a man named Boris A. Max, a Public Defender who is closely connected to the Communist Party. Max makes a serious and committed effort to defend Bigger, but his self-righteous and long-winded soliloquy is no match for Buckley's sharp phrases and mob-inciting rhetoric. Reverend Hammond re-appears in Bigger's cell to make another attempt to save Bigger's soul. Hammond gives Bigger a necklace with a wooden cross to wear as a reminder and perhaps, in this, Bigger might be redeemed from his sins. Bigger is willing to wear the wooden cross until the next morning when he is escorted to the court and apprehended by the sight of the Ku Klux Klan and their burning cross. Bigger is horrified by the image of the cross and he throws his necklace away.

The judge easily convicts Bigger and condemns him to die by the Friday, the narrative course of the novel having elapsed in a matter of days. Bigger sits in his prison cell and Max makes a few visits, bringing hope of a last-minute rescue but the Governor refuses to offer Bigger a stay of execution. In his final moments, Bigger reflects on his miserable life and even though he is frightened of the electric chair, he is relieved to be dying.

13.5 THEMES

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BLINDNESS/HUBRIS

In his development of this theme, Richard Wright alludes to several stories from classical Greek mythology, most notably the stories of Oedipus of Thebes. Like Sophocles' stories of Oedipus, Native Son intertwines the idea of hubris ("excessive pride") with the idea of blindness. Most notably, we see that Bigger Thomas' incredible pride and anger often blind him from seeing reality. In a similar way, the Dalton's wealth and complacency are manifested in Mrs. Dalton's physical blindness. Both the blind Daltons and the blind and angry courtroom mob serve as examples of American racism. Ironically, Bigger's blindness prevents him from seeing what opportunities he does have; even as his pride fuels his blindness, his blindness prevents him from taking opportunities for advancement. Just as Bigger is blind to his potential, white America is blindly unaware of the sufferings of racism and poverty.

IDENTITY

In Book Three, the theme of identity is developed mostly in the scenes where Bigger prepares to face his death in the electric chair. In these final moments, Bigger must struggle to "come to terms" with what he has done and what he has become. In this regard, Bigger's identity crisis is more of a struggle to separate his own impressions from the projections of the racist society around him. Even as Bigger must accept responsibility for his crimes, he faces the complex task of asserting his own worth even as he can't ignore his crime. When Bigger is involved in the process of asserting his own worth, he finds that he is in a trap because he has been unable to act upon all of the dreams that he has.

Bigger wants to define himself as an aviator or even as the leader of his gang, but these are all ultimately false. One important thing to note is that Wright's treatment of the identity theme resembles the philosophies expounded in several existentialist works. In particular, the prison scenes toward the end of the novel are intended to hearken back to the works of Wright's favorite writer, Dostoevsky. Particularly after his rejection of established religion, Bigger has the existentialist burden of searching for meaning in life without the traditional support systems offered by the church or other social structures. By the end of Native Son, it seems that Bigger is one man who is doomed to fight against the machinery of a hostile world.

MADNESS

This is one of the lesser themes in the novel, developed mostly during Part Two (Flight) and Part Three (Fate). After Bigger kills Mary Dalton, his mind is racing and at the same time that his anger is stoked by his ego, Bigger is also afraid that he is losing control of his mind. During the "Flight" episode, the narrative suggests

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that Bigger is running away from the authorities at the same time that he is hoping that he might run away from his madness, his lack of control over his life, etc. When Bigger kills Bessie, he has a false hope that this action replaces Mary's accidental murder because it is intentional; and he hopes that the "intentional" aspect of the act will bring him back into control of his mind. Instead, this second murder only fuels the madness that has already taken over. Wright depicts this madness as something we might contrast to Bigger's "anger" or "hubris." There is a deliberate emphasis on Bigger's paranoia as something separate to his crimes against society. Furthermore, Bigger's feelings of being "trapped" seem to carry a psychological significance that matches the more literal "trapped" feeling of living in a slum. Finally, Bigger's crimes have a demented logic of symbolism. In Doc's poolroom, both the gash in the table and the threats directed towards Gus seem to have a purely expressive role Bigger doesn't actually stab anyone, he simply demonstrates, "traces," what he would do to a person.

On the other hand, Bessie's murder was both a demonstration of Bigger's power and an actual murder. Bigger pretended to gut Gus as a way of demonstrating that he was the truly "solid" character who wasn't afraid. The fact that Bigger smashed Bessie in the head seems to hint at the fact that Bigger is still trying to escape from (and if necessary, destroy) the mind. This is also substantiated by Bessie's role as one of several "escape" characters in the novel. In all, Wright seems to make a special argument that madness is a distinct, albeit compounded, effect of poverty and racism. While Bigger's madness is the product of several factors, it becomes a separate burden for Bigger to carry.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ESCAPE

This theme is very much related to the theme of madness and it recurs in all three books of Native Son. It is worth noting that many of Wright's moral and political ideas, derived from Communist ideology, never achieved common acceptance among his largely American readership. While Wright does draw some superficial distinctions between Bessie and Ma, his philosophy reduces both Bessie's alcoholism and Ma's ardent religion to "escapes" from reality. Through Bigger, Wright sums up Ma's religion as a sense of resignation in regards to the present, only permissible and justified by faith in heaven, a life after death. The "escape" aspects of organized religion are exaggerated by the Reverend's antics and when this "holy fool" is juxtaposed with the Dalton's frigid, unstinting compassion, much of Society's morality seems to be only surface-deep. While Bigger avoids Ma's escapism, he is less successful navigating through the Black Belt's "underworld" of sex, violence and drugs, portrayed in the Book One and Book Two. The ransom note, the half-attempts to escape to Harlem, the alcoholic atmosphere at the Paris Grill, like the movie-house in the beginning of the novel all of these are escapes that offer a temporary relief from life's misery, even as they leave the characters worse off and increasingly ill-equipped to get their lives in order. Ironically, these escapes both intensify and add to the miseries of the Black

Belt. Mr. Dalton's Ping-Pong tables are farcical in comparison to religion and alcohol, but this donation indicates that Dalton is well aware that the Bigger Thomases of the world are in need of a diversion.

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TERRITORY

The very title of the novel, Native Son, invites the reader to think about ideas of "nativism" and "territory." From the opening scene of the novel, where Bigger is killing the rat-invader, to Bigger's execution at the novel's end, there is a tension between Bigger's "native" status and his lack of political rights. Bigger was born in Mississippi, not Chicago, and the idea of a "native son" applies more to Bigger's status as an American as opposed to his status as a Chicagoan. Indeed, for all of the squalor of the Black Belt, Wright continually presses the argument that Bigger would be no better off in Mississippi or in Harlem. As America's "native son," Bigger is born an American, but perhaps more important, the Bigger that he becomes, is a product of America's native soil. The novel continually presents Bigger's "trapped" feelings and his lack of personal, physical freedom.

While this seems to contradict Bigger's title role as a "native son," Wright ultimately makes the argument that poverty and American racism has remade Bigger into the "native son" that he has become. When Wright presents a detail that seems particular to Chicago or the Black Belt, there is usually a larger argument or ideology that is attached to it. One example is the fact that Mr. Dalton is Bigger's employer and landlord. While this might have been a common occurrence, Wright fashions this detail within the rubric of Marxism. In this regard, Mr. Dalton is evidence of the essentially feudal relationship (property-owner vs. laborer) that is masked by and intertwined within capitalism. In his treatment of the "property" theme, Wright argues that capitalism and racism reify one another, conspiring to insure Bigger's poverty and misery.

13.6 MOTIFS

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

POPULAR CULTURE

Throughout *Native Son,* Wright depicts popular culture—as conveyed through films, magazines, and newspapers—as a major force in American racism, constantly bombarding citizens with images and ideas that reinforce the nation's oppressive racial hierarchy. In films such as the one Bigger attends in Book One, whites are depicted as glamorous, attractive, and cultured, while blacks are portrayed as jungle savages or servants. Wright emphasizes that this portrayal is not unique to the film Bigger sees, but is replicated in nearly every film and every magazine. Not surprisingly, then, both blacks and whites see blacks are inferior brutes—a view that has crippling effects on whites and absolutely devastating effects for blacks.

Bigger is so influenced by this media saturation that, upon meeting the Daltons, he is completely unable to be himself. All he can do is act out the role of the subservient black man that he has seen in countless popular culture representations. Later, Wright portrays the media as one of the forces that leads to Bigger's execution, as the sensationalist press stirs up a furor over his case in order to sell newspapers. The attention prompts Buckley, the State's Attorney, to hurry Bigger's case along and seek the death penalty. Wright scatters images of popular culture throughout *Native Son,* constantly reminding us of the extremely influential role the media plays in hardening already destructive racial stereotypes.

RELIGION

Religion appears in *Native Son* mostly in relation to Bigger's mother and Reverend Hammond. Bigger's mother relies on her religion as a source of comfort in the face of the crushing realities of life on the South Side. Bigger, however, compares his mother's religion with Bessie's whiskey drinking—an escapist pastime with no inherent value. At times, Bigger wishes he were able to enjoy the comfort religion brings his mother, but he cannot shake his longing for a life in this world. When Reverend Hammond gives Bigger a cross to wear while he is in prison, Bigger equates the cross with the crosses that are burned during racist rituals. In making this comparison, Wright suggests that even the moral province of Christianity has been corrupted by racism in America.

COMMUNISM

Wright's portrayal of communism throughout *Native Son,* especially in the figures of Jan and Max, is one of the novel's most controversial aspects. Wright was still a member of the Communist Party at the time he wrote this novel, and many critics have argued that Max's long courtroom speech is merely an attempt on Wright's part to spread communist propaganda. While Wright uses communist characters and imagery in *Native Son* generally to evoke a positive, supportive tone for the movement, he does not depict the Party and its efforts as universally benevolent. Jan, the only character who explicitly identifies himself as a member of the Party, is almost comically blind to Bigger's feelings during Book One. Likewise, Max, who represents the Party as its lawyer, is unable to understand Bigger completely. In the end, Bigger's salvation comes not from the Communist Party, but from his own realization that he must win the battle that rages within him before he can fight any battles in the outside world. The changes that Wright identifies must come not from social change, but from individual effort.

13.7 SYMBOLS

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

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MRS. DALTON'S BLINDNESS

Mrs. Dalton's blindness plays a crucial role in the circumstances of Bigger's murder of Mary, as it gives Bigger the escape route of smothering Mary to keep her from revealing his presence in her bedroom. On a symbolic level, this set of circumstances serves as a metaphor for the vicious circle of racism in American society: Mrs. Dalton's inability to see Bigger causes him to turn to violence, just as the inability of whites to see blacks as individuals causes blacks to live their lives in fear and hatred. Mrs. Dalton's blindness represents the inability of white Americans as a whole to see black Americans as anything other than the embodiment of their media-enforced -stereotypes. Wright echoes Mrs. Dalton's literal blindness throughout the novel in his descriptions of other characters who are figuratively blind for one reason or another. Indeed, Bigger later realizes that, in a sense, even he has been blind, unable to see whites as individuals rather than a single oppressive mass.

THE CROSS

The Christian cross traditionally symbolizes compassion and sacrifice for a greater good, and indeed Reverend Hammond intends as much when he gives Bigger a cross while he is in jail. Bigger even begins to think of himself as Christ like, imagining that he is sacrificing himself in order to wash away the shame of being black, just as Christ died to wash away the world's sins. Later, however, after Bigger sees the image of a burning cross, he can only associate crosses with the hatred and racism that have crippled him throughout his life. As such, the cross in *Native Son* comes to symbolize the opposite of what it usually signifies in a Christian context.

SNOW

A light snow begins falling at the start of Book Two, and this snow eventually turns into a blizzard that aids in Bigger's capture. Throughout the novel, Bigger thinks of whites not as individuals, but as a looming white mountain or a great natural force pressing down upon him. The blizzard is raging as Bigger jumps from his window to escape after Mary's bones are found in the furnace. When he falls to the ground, the snow fills his mouth, ears, and eyes—all his senses are overwhelmed with a literal whiteness, representing the metaphorical "whiteness" he feels has been controlling him his whole life. Bigger tries to flee, but the snow has sealed off all avenues of escape, allowing the white police to surround and capture him.

13.8 STUDY QUESTIONS

In what ways does Wright portray Bigger's day-to-day existence as a prison, even before his arrest and trial?

The crowded, rat-infested apartment Bigger shares with his brother, sister, and mother is, in a sense, a prison cell. Bigger is imprisoned in the urban ghetto by

racist rental policies. Likewise, his own consciousness is a prison, as a sense of failure, inadequacy, and unrelenting fear pervades his entire life. Racist white society, Bigger's mother, and even Bigger himself all believe that he is destined to meet a bad end. Bigger's relentless conviction that he faces an inevitably disastrous fate indicates his feeling that he has absolutely no control over his life. Society permits him access only to menial jobs, poor housing, and little or no opportunity for education—on the whole, he has no choice but a substandard life.

Describe the real estate practices that were applied to black families in Chicago's South Side in the 1930s. With these practices in mind, why is Mr. Dalton—an avowed philanthropist toward blacks—a hypocrite?

Although ample housing was available in most sections of 1930s Chicago, white property owners imposed agreements that enabled blacks to rent apartments only on the city's South Side. These limitations created an artificial housing shortage, allowing landlords to increase rents on the South Side despite the deplorable conditions of many of their buildings. Mr. Dalton has earned much of his fortune from such racist rental policies, which he considers customary and does not even think to consider unethical. In this manner, Mr. Dalton contributes significantly toward the social disparities that terrify, oppress, and enrage blacks such as Bigger. Given his actions, Mr. Dalton's charitable donations to the black community are merely meaningless tokens—condescending and patronizing gestures. Mr. Dalton expresses his so-called benevolence by giving Bigger a menial job, but, as Max says, Dalton does so only in an attempt to erase the guilt he feels for his role in oppressing blacks in the first place.

Describe Jan and Mary's attitude toward race relations. In what ways does their more subtle racism resemble the more overt prejudice of other whites?

To Jan and Mary, breaking social taboos is a thrill. They derive an odd satisfaction from eating in a black restaurant with Bigger. They clearly want to experience "blackness," yet come nowhere near an understanding of the frustration and hopelessness that constitutes blackness for Bigger. Mary and Jan are, in effect, merely entertaining themselves by slumming in the ghetto with Bigger. Like the Daltons, then, they are blind to the social reality of blackness. Moreover, Mary uses the same language that racists such as Peggy use to describe black Americans. When talking to Bigger, Mary uses the phrase "your people" and refers to black Americans as "they" and "them." Her language implies that there is an alien, foreign aura to black Americans, that they are somehow a separate, essentially different class of human beings. Mary's remark about "our country" is also telling, as it indicates that she assigns ownership of America to white people in her mind. In the act of claiming that "[t]hey're human," Mary still maintains a psychological division between white and black Americans. Although she briefly seems to recognize Bigger's feelings, she still has not reached the point at which she can say, "*We're* human."

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How does Bigger's desperate flight from the police symbolize his existence as a whole?

The manhunt, which is conducted entirely by whites, literally corrals Bigger in a shrinking cross-section of Chicago. "Whiteness" pursues Bigger through an intense building-by-building search of the entire South Side. Like a cornered rat, Bigger desperately moves within this ever shrinking square, trying to evade the "whiteness" that has, in a sense, cornered and corralled him his entire life. This "whiteness" has always pursued Bigger, policed him, and stood ready to punish him if he crosses the "line." The snowstorm that rages during the manhunt is a literal symbol of this metaphorical "whiteness," surrounding and crippling Bigger by preventing him from leaving the city. Like the waves of white men searching for him, the snow falls relentlessly around Bigger, locking him in place. Literally and symbolically, "whiteness" falls on Bigger's head with the power of a natural disaster.

As Wright portrays it, how does the psychology of racial prejudice contribute to Bigger's transformation into a murderer and a criminal?

In killing a white woman, Bigger does what the white American majority has always feared he might do. The whites are convinced that he raped Mary first—a violation of the ultimate social taboo that separates black men from white women. In an effort to keep Bigger from doing what they have feared, the empowered majority of whites have narrowed the boundaries of his existence and kept him in constant fear. Instead of ensuring his submission, however, this confinement has caused Bigger to respond to his overwhelming fear of "whiteness" by doing exactly what the empowered majority always feared he would do. In response to his crime, the white-dominated press and authorities incite mob hatred against him. They portray Bigger as bestial, inhuman rapist and killer of white women. This viciously racist portrayal of Bigger—and the white mob fury it engenders—gives the whites a justification to terrorize all of the South Side in an attempt to frighten the entire black community. In this chain of events, Wright depicts the irrational logic of racism, effectively a vicious cycle that reproduces itself over and over again.

Is Bigger's trial a fair one? In Wright's portrayal, how does racism affect the American judicial process? What role does the media play in determining popular conceptions of justice?

Bigger's trial is unfair from the start, and it is clear that the proceedings are merely a spectacle. Bigger's guilt and punishment are decided before his trial ever begins, perhaps even before he is arrested. The newspapers do not refer to him as the suspect or the accused, but rather as the "Negro Rapist Murderer." There is no question that Bigger will be sentenced to death. Nonetheless, the public still feels the need to go through the motions of justice. The public may desire to build a wall of hysteria surrounding Bigger in order to justify its racist stereotypes, yet it also attempts to deny its racism by creating the illusion of equal treatment under the law. As Max argues later, there is a component of guilt in this hateful hysteria, as it represents an attempt on the part of the empowered majority to deny its

responsibility in Bigger's crimes. The illusion of equality under the law disguises the economic inequality that has condemned Bigger to a hopeless, impoverished urban ghetto and a series of menial low-wage jobs. Edward Robertson, an editor of the *Jackson Daily Star,* states that keeping the black population in constant fear ensures its submission. However, as Bigger's life demonstrates, this constant fear actually causes violence. In this sense, the empowered majority sows the seeds of minority violence in the very act of trying to quell it.

13.9 SUGGESTED ESSAY TOPICS

1. Describe the psychological and behavioral change that overcomes Bigger during the interview with Mr. Dalton. Why does he change in the presence of Mr. Dalton? In what way is it significant that Bigger goes to the movies before going to the Daltons'?
2. What are some of the real historical events that occur or are mirrored in *Native Son*? How does Wright weave these events into his fictional narrative, and how does this technique affect the novel as a whole?
3. What role does imagery of vision and sight play in *Native Son*? Think especially of Mrs. Dalton's blindness and Bigger's murder of Mary.
4. How does popular culture serve as a form of indoctrination throughout *Native*
5. Do you think social conditions and cultural climates are more important factors in determining our lives than the choices we make?
6. What role do you think culture and society play in the choices we make? What role do you think race plays in the choices we make? What roles do culture, society, and race play in the choices Bigger makes?
7. Think about the prejudice against Communism and the prejudice against black people in this story. In what ways are the two prejudices similar and in what ways are they different?
8. Did the Communists in this story (as represented by Mary, Jan, and then Max) offer American society a solution to its problem of racial and class tension?

13.10 FURTHER STUDY QUESTION

- What events lead Bigger Thomas and Mary Dalton to each other?
- Why does Bigger Thomas kill Mary Dalton?
- How does Bigger Thomas attempt to get rid of the evidence?
- How does Bigger Thomas make his situation worse?

- Why does Bigger kill Bessie?
- What are the consequences of Bigger's actions to other people?
- What happens to Bigger at the end of the story?
- Why do police think a white person was involved in the crime?
- Why does committing murder make Bigger feel empowered?
- Turn and talk: Bigger went to work for the Dalton's to help his family. How is this ironic?

BLOCK - IV
DRAMA

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UNIT 14 DEATH OF A SALESMAN - ARTHUR MILLER

Structure

14.0 INTRODUCTION

Death of a Salesman is a 1949 stage play written by American playwright Arthur Miller. It won the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and Tony Award for Best Play. The play premiered on Broadway in February 1949, running for 742 performances, and has been revived on Broadway four times, winning three Tony Awards for Best Revival. It is widely considered to be one of the greatest plays of the 20th century. *Death of a Salesman* is such a popular play that it has remained at the center of the modern American plays. This play is an experiment in the theatre. It is the best example of expressionism in modern American play. As an expressionistic modern American play, it uses a cross section of a house as a metaphor for an entire house and an entire life. The death in *Death of a Salesman* implies the destruction of a family holding certain beliefs that have been wrong from the start.

Death of a Salesman has been given a privileged position in American drama because it is a modern tragedy. Miller's Willy Loman is not a peasant, nor is he noble. In fact, Miller took a frightening risk in producing a figure that we find hard to like. Willy wants to be well liked, but as an audience, we find it difficult to like a person who whines, complains and accepts petty immorality as a normal way of life. Willy stands as an aspect of our culture, commercial and otherwise that is at the center of our reflection of ourselves. Willy Loman has mesmerized audiences in America in many different economic circumstances: prosperity, recession, rapid growth, and cautions development

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14.1 OBJECTIVE

The super-**objective** in Arthur **Miller's Death of a Salesman** is the American Dream. Willy Loman has spent his career striving for a home, a new car, and new appliances. He argues that one needs to be liked in order to succeed in life. Willy's drive also encourages his sons, Biff and Happy.

14.2 AUTHOR INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller was born in Harlem on October 17, 1915, the son of Polish immigrants, Isidore and Augusta Miller. Miller's father had established a successful clothing store upon coming to America, so the family enjoyed wealth; however, this prosperity ended with the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Financial hardship compelled the Miller family to move to Brooklyn in 1929.

Miller graduated from high school in New York in 1933. He applied to Cornell University and the University of Michigan, but both schools refused him admission. Miller worked a variety of odd jobs, including as a host of a radio program before the University of Michigan accepted him. At school, he studied journalism, became the night editor of the *Michigan Daily*, and began experimenting with theater.In addition to hosting a radio program, Miller held a variety of jobs during his early career. After he left the University of Michigan, Miller wrote plays for the Federal Theatre in 1939. The Federal Theatre provided work for unemployed writers, actors, directors, and designers. Congress closed the Federal Theatre late in 1939.Miller died on February 10, 2005, of heart failure. He was 89 years old.

Miller's prolific writing career spans a period of over 60 years. During this time, Miller has written 26 plays, a novel entitled *Focus* (1945), several travel journals, a collection of short stories entitled *I Don't Need You Anymore* (1967), and an autobiography entitled *Timebends: A Life* (1987). Miller's plays generally address social issues and center around an individual in a social dilemma or an individual at the mercy of society.Miller's first play, *No Villain*, produced in 1936, explores Marxist theory and inner conflict through an individual facing ruin as a result of a strike. *Honors at Dawn* (1937) also centers around a strike and contrasting views of the economy but focuses on an individual's inability to express himself. *The Great Disobedience* (1938) makes a connection between the prison system and capitalism. *The Golden Years* (1940) tells the story of Cortes despoiling Mexico, as well as the effects of capitalism and fate on the individual.

Miller produced two radio plays in 1941: *The Pussycat and the Expert Plumber Who Was a Man*, and *William Ireland's Confession*. Miller's third radio play, *The Four Freedoms*, was produced in 1942.*The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944) revolves around a person who believes he has no control over his life but is instead the victim of chance. *All My Sons* (1947) explores the effect

of past decisions on the present and future of the individual. *Death of a Salesman* (1949) addresses the loss of identity, as well as a man's inability to accept change within himself and society. *The Crucible* (1953) re-creates the Salem witch trials, focusing on paranoid hysteria as well as the individual's struggle to remain true to ideals and convictions. *A View from the Bridge* (1955) details three people and their experiences in crime. *After the Fall* (1964) focuses on betrayal as a trait of humanity. *Incident at Vichy* (1964) confronts a person's struggle with guilt and responsibility. *The Price* (1968) tells the story of an individual confronted with free will and the burden of responsibility. *Fame* (1970) tells the story of a famous playwright who is confronted but not recognized. *The American Clock* (1980) focuses on the Depression and its effects on the individual, while *Elegy for a Lady* (1982) addresses death and its effects on relationships. *Some Kind of Love Story* (1982) centers on society and the corruption of justice. *The Ride Down Mountain Morgan* (1991) centers around a man who believes he can obtain everything he wants. *The Last Yankee* (1993) explores the changing needs of individuals and the resulting tension that arises within a marriage. *Broken Glass* (1994) tells the story of individuals using denial as a tool to escape pain. Miller also wrote the screenplay for the movie version of *The Crucible*, which was produced in 1996.

Miller has received numerous honors and awards throughout his career. Miller's accolades include the Michigan's Avery Hopwood Award, 1936 and 1937; the Theatre Guild's Bureau of New Plays Award, 1937; the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award, 1947; the Pulitzer Prize, 1949; the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award, 1949; the Antoinette Perry and Donaldson Awards, 1953; and the Gold Medal for Drama by the National Institutes of Arts and Letters, 1959. Miller was also elected president of PEN (Poets, Essayists, and Novelists) in 1965.

14.3 CHARACTERS

WILLY LOMAN

An insecure, self-deluded traveling salesman. Willy believes wholeheartedly in the American Dream of easy success and wealth, but he never achieves it. Nor do his sons fulfill his hope that they will succeed where he has failed. When Willy's illusions begin to fail under the pressing realities of his life, his mental health begins to unravel. The overwhelming tensions caused by this disparity, as well as those caused by the societal imperatives that drive Willy, form the essential conflict of *Death of a Salesman*.

Despite his desperate searching through his past, Willy does not achieve the self-realization or self-knowledge typical of the tragic hero. The quasi-resolution that his suicide offers him represents only a partial discovery of the truth. While he achieves a professional understanding of himself and the fundamental nature of the sales profession, Willy fails to realize his personal failure and betrayal of his soul

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and family through the meticulously constructed artifice of his life. He cannot grasp the true personal, emotional, spiritual understanding of himself as a literal "loman" or "low man."

Willy is too driven by his own "willy"-ness or perverse "willfulness" to recognize the slanted reality that his desperate mind has forged. Still, many critics, focusing on Willy's entrenchment in a quagmire of lies, delusions, and self-deceptions, ignore the significant accomplishment of his partial self-realization. Willy's failure to recognize the anguished love offered to him by his family is crucial to the climax of his torturous day, and the play presents this incapacity as the real tragedy. Despite this failure, Willy makes the most extreme sacrifice in his attempt to leave an inheritance that will allow Biff to fulfill the American Dream.

BIFF LOMAN

Willy's thirty-four-year-old elder son. Biff led a charmed life in high school as a football star with scholarship prospects, good male friends, and fawning female admirers. He failed math, however, and did not have enough credits to graduate. Since then, his kleptomania has gotten him fired from every job that he has held. Biff represents Willy's vulnerable, poetic, tragic side. He cannot ignore his instincts, which tell him to abandon Willy's paralyzing dreams and move out West to work with his hands. He ultimately fails to reconcile his life with Willy's expectations of him.

Unlike Willy and Happy, Biff feels compelled to seek the truth about himself. While his father and brother are unable to accept the miserable reality of their respective lives, Biff acknowledges his failure and eventually manages to confront it. Even the difference between his name and theirs reflects this polarity: whereas Willy and Happy willfully and happily delude themselves, Biff bristles stiffly at self-deception. Biff's discovery that Willy has a mistress strips him of his faith in Willy and Willy's ambitions for him.

Consequently, Willy sees Biff as an underachiever, while Biff sees himself as trapped in Willy's grandiose fantasies. After his epiphany in Bill Oliver's office, Biff determines to break through the lies surrounding the Loman family in order to come to realistic terms with his own life. Intent on revealing the simple and humble truth behind Willy's fantasy, Biff longs for the territory (the symbolically free West) obscured by his father's blind faith in a skewed, materialist version of the American Dream. Biff's identity crisis is a function of his and his father's disillusionment, which, in order to reclaim his identity, he must expose.

LINDA LOMAN

Willy's loyal, loving wife. Linda suffers through Willy's grandiose dreams and self-delusions. Occasionally, she seems to be taken in by Willy's self-deluded hopes for future glory and success, but at other times, she seems far more realistic and less fragile than her husband. She has nurtured the family through all of Willy's

misguided attempts at success, and her emotional strength and perseverance support Willy until his collapse.

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HAPPY LOMAN

Willy's thirty-two-year-old younger son. Happy has lived in Biff's shadow all of his life, but he compensates by nurturing his relentless sex drive and professional ambition. Happy represents Willy's sense of self-importance, ambition, and blind servitude to societal expectations. Although he works as an assistant to an assistant buyer in a department store, Happy presents himself as supremely important. Additionally, he practices bad business ethics and sleeps with the girlfriends of his superiors.

Happy shares none of the poetry that erupts from Biff and that is buried in Willy—he is the stunted incarnation of Willy's worst traits and the embodiment of the lie of the happy American Dream. As such, Happy is a difficult character with whom to empathize. He is one-dimensional and static throughout the play. His empty vow to avenge Willy's death by finally "beating this racket" provides evidence of his critical condition: for Happy, who has lived in the shadow of the inflated expectations of his brother, there is no escape from the Dream's indoctrinated lies. Happy's diseased condition is irreparable—he lacks even the tiniest spark of self-knowledge or capacity for self-analysis.

He does share Willy's capacity for self-delusion, trumpeting himself as the assistant buyer at his store, when, in reality, he is only an assistant to the assistant buyer. He does not possess a hint of the latent thirst for knowledge that proves Biff's salvation. Happy is a doomed, utterly duped figure, destined to be swallowed up by the force of blind ambition that fuels his insatiable sex drive.

CHARLEY

Willy's next-door neighbor. Charley owns a successful business and his son, Bernard, is a wealthy, important lawyer. Willy is jealous of Charley's success. Charley gives Willy money to pay his bills, and Willy reveals at one point, choking back tears, that Charley is his only friend.

BERNARD

Bernard is Charley's son and an important, successful lawyer. Although Willy used to mock Bernard for studying hard, Bernard always loved Willy's sons dearly and regarded Biff as a hero. Bernard's success is difficult for Willy to accept because his own sons' lives do not measure up.

BEN

Willy's wealthy older brother. Ben has recently died and appears only in Willy's "daydreams." Willy regards Ben as a symbol of the success that he so desperately craves for himself and his sons.

THE WOMAN

Willy's mistress when Happy and Biff were in high school. The Woman's attention and admiration boost Willy's fragile ego. When Biff catches Willy in his hotel room with The Woman, he loses faith in his father, and his dream of passing math and going to college dies.

HOWARD WAGNER

Willy's boss. Howard inherited the company from his father, whom Willy regarded as "a masterful man" and "a prince." Though much younger than Willy, Howard treats Willy with condescension and eventually fires him, despite Willy's wounded assertions that he named Howard at his birth.

STANLEY

A waiter at Frank's Chop House. Stanley and Happy seem to be friends, or at least acquaintances, and they banter about and ogle Miss Forsythe together before Biff and Willy arrive at the restaurant.

MISS FORSYTHE AND LETTA

Two young women whom Happy and Biff meet at Frank's Chop House. It seems likely that Miss Forsythe and Letta are prostitutes, judging from Happy's repeated comments about their moral character and the fact that they are "on call."

JENNY - Charley's secretary.

14.4 SUMMARY

Death of a Salesman takes place in New York and Boston. The action begins in the home of Willy Loman, an aging salesman who has just returned from a road trip. Willy is having difficulty remembering events, as well as distinguishing the present from his memories of the past. His wife, Linda, suggests that he request a job in New York rather than travel each week. Linda and Willy argue about their oldest son Biff. Biff and his brother, Happy, overhear Willy talking to himself. Biff learns that Willy is usually talking to him (Biff) during these private reveries. Biff and Happy discuss women and the future. Both are dissatisfied with their jobs: Biff is discontent working for someone else, and Happy cannot be promoted until the merchandise manager dies. They contemplate buying a ranch and working together.

At this point, Willy relives several scenes from his past, including the time when, during high school, Biff admits to stealing a football and promises to throw a pass for Willy during the game. Willy also remembers his old dream of the boys visiting him in Boston during a road trip. Finally in his reverie, he relives the time that Bernard, son of the next-door neighbor Charley, informs Willy that Biff is failing math and will not graduate unless his scores improve. In this last scene,

Willy listens but dismisses the important news because Biff is "well-liked," and Bernard is not. Willy remembers a conversation with Linda in which he inflates his earnings but is then forced to admit he exaggerated when Linda calculates his commission. Willy recalls complaining about his appearance and remembers Linda assuring him that he is attractive. At this point, Willy's memories begin to blend together. While he is reliving his conversation with Linda, he begins to remember his conversation with the Woman (a woman with whom he had an affair). He is unable to separate memories of Linda from the Woman.

The play continues in the present with his neighbor Charley coming over to play cards. However, Uncle Ben appears to Willy while he is playing cards with Charley, and Willy relives an old conversation with Ben while simultaneously talking with Charley. As a result, Willy becomes confused by the two different "discussions" he is having one in the present, one in the past and he accuses Charley of cheating. After Charley leaves, Willy relives Ben's visit and asks Ben for advice because he feels insecure since he did not really know his own father. Willy also remembers instructing Biff and Happy to steal some supplies from the construction site in order to remodel the porch so that he can impress Ben. The play once again returns to the present, in which Biff and Happy talk with Linda about Willy. Biff and Happy learn that Willy is on straight commission and has been borrowing money from Charley in order to pay bills. Linda criticizes her sons for abandoning their father in order to pursue their own selfish desires, and she gives Biff a choice: Respect your father or do not come home. Biff decides to stay in New York, but he reminds Linda that Willy threw him out of the house. He also tells Linda that Willy is a "fake." It is at this point that Linda informs her sons that Willy is suicidal.

Willy overhears his wife and sons talking, and he and Biff argue. When Happy describes Biff's plan to open his own business, Willy directs Biff on what to do during his interview with Bill Oliver. Willy remembers Biff's football games. Before Linda and Willy go to bed, Linda questions Willy: She wants to know what Biff is holding against him, but Willy refuses to answer. Biff removes the rubber tubing Willy hid behind the heater. The next morning Willy prepares to visit his boss Howard to ask him for a job in New York. During the meeting, Howard informs Willy that there are no positions available in New York. Willy reminds Howard that he named him, and he was a very successful salesman when he worked for Howard's father. Howard remains impassive and instead fires him. Upon being fired, Willy begins freefalling into his memories of the past. Willy recalls Ben's visit once again. This time, Willy asks for advice because things are not going as he planned. He remembers Ben offering him a job in Alaska. He accepts, but Linda intervenes and reminds him of Dave Single man. Willy shifts from his memory of Ben to Biff's last football game. Willy recalls Charley pretending he is unaware of Biff's game, and this infuriates Willy. Willy's daydream ends when he arrives at Charley's office.

Bernard is waiting for Charley in his office. Willy and Bernard discuss Biff and consider possible reasons for his lack of motivation and success. Bernard

says Biff changed right after high school when he visited Willy in Boston. Bernard questions Willy about what happened when Biff went to visit him. Willy becomes defensive. Bernard is on his way to present a case before the Supreme Court. Bernard's success both pleases and upsets Willy. Charley gives Willy money for his insurance payment and offers him a job, an offer that Willy refuses. At a restaurant where Willy, Biff, and Happy are to meet, Happy flirts with a young prostitute, and Biff is upset because Oliver did not remember him.

Then Biff realizes that he was never a salesman for Oliver; instead, he was a shipping clerk. Willy tells his sons that he has been fired. Biff attempts to explain what happened with Oliver (after seeing Oliver, Biff sneaked back into his office and stole Oliver's pen); however, Willy is reliving the past, recalling Bernard informing Linda that Biff has failed math and will not graduate. Willy then remembers Bernard telling her Biff has taken a train to Boston.

Willy relives the time when Biff finds out about Willy's affair with the Woman: Biff comes to Willy's hotel room in Boston to tell Willy that he will not graduate unless Willy can convince Mr. Birnbaum to pass him. Willy recalls his own desperate attempts to hide the Woman in the bathroom. When the Woman comes out of the bathroom with Biff in the room, Willy's plan to conceal the affair is ruined. Willy's final memory is of Biff calling him a "fake" before walking out the door.

The play continues in the present when Stanley reappears, and Willy realizes he is actually still in the restaurant. Willy returns home and begins building a garden, even though it is night. Linda throws Happy and Biff out of the house. Ben appears to Willy while he is planting seeds. At this point, Willy does not remember a previous conversation with Ben, as he does several times earlier in the play. Instead, he and Ben discuss his plan to commit suicide. Willy and Ben converse in the present, but they are talking about the future. Ben warns Willy that the insurance company might refuse to pay a settlement and Biff might never forgive him.

Biff approaches Willy in the garden to tell him he is leaving home for good. Biff and Willy argue, and Biff confronts Willy with the rubber hose, saying he will not pity him if he commits suicide. According to Biff, the Lomans have never been truthful with one another or themselves. Biff believes that he and Willy are ordinary people who can easily be replaced. Biff and Willy reconcile. Ben reappears to Willy and reminds him of the insurance policy. Willy drives away. The Lomans, Charley, and Bernard gather at Willy's grave.

14.5 THEMES

THE AMERICAN DREAM

Willy believes wholeheartedly in what he considers the promise of the American Dream that a "well liked" and "personally attractive" man in business will indubitably and deservedly acquire the material comforts offered by modern American life.

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Oddly, his fixation with the superficial qualities of attractiveness and likeability is at odds with a more gritty, more rewarding understanding of the American Dream that identifies hard work without complaint as the key to success. Willy's interpretation of likeability is superficial he childishly dislikes Bernard because he considers Bernard a nerd. Willy's blind faith in his stunted version of the American Dream leads to his rapid psychological decline when he is unable to accept the disparity between the Dream and his own life.

ABANDONMENT

Willy's life charts a course from one abandonment to the next, leaving him in greater despair each time. Willy's father leaves him and Ben when Willy is very young, leaving Willy neither a tangible (money) nor an intangible (history) legacy. Ben eventually departs for Alaska, leaving Willy to lose himself in a warped vision of the American Dream. Likely a result of these early experiences, Willy develops a fear of abandonment, which makes him want his family to conform to the American Dream. His efforts to raise perfect sons, however, reflect his inability to understand reality. The young Biff, whom Willy considers the embodiment of promise, drops Willy and Willy's zealous ambitions for him when he finds out about Willy's adultery. Biff's ongoing inability to succeed in business furthers his estrangement from Willy. When, at Frank's Chop House, Willy finally believes that Biff is on the cusp of greatness, Biff shatters Willy's illusions and, along with Happy, abandons the deluded, babbling Willy in the washroom.

BETRAYAL

Willy's primary obsession throughout the play is what he considers to be Biff's betrayal of his ambitions for him. Willy believes that he has every right to expect Biff to fulfill the promise inherent in him. When Biff walks out on Willy's ambitions for him, Willy takes this rejection as a personal affront (he associates it with "insult" and "spite"). Willy, after all, is a salesman, and Biff's ego-crushing rebuff ultimately reflects Willy's inability to sell him on the American Dream the product in which Willy himself believes most faithfully. Willy assumes that Biff's betrayal stems from Biff's discovery of Willy's affair with The Woman a betrayal of Linda's love. Whereas Willy feels that Biff has betrayed him, Biff feels that Willy, a "phony little fake," has betrayed *him* with his unending stream of ego-stroking lies.

14.6 SYMBOLS

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

SEEDS

Seeds represent for Willy the opportunity to prove the worth of his labor, both as a salesman and a father. His desperate, nocturnal attempt to grow vegetables

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signifies his shame about barely being able to put food on the table and having nothing to leave his children when he passes. Willy feels that he has worked hard but fears that he will not be able to help his offspring any more than his own abandoning father helped him. The seeds also symbolize Willy's sense of failure with Biff. Despite the American Dream's formula for success, which Willy considers infallible, Willy's efforts to cultivate and nurture Biff went awry. Realizing that his all-American football star has turned into a lazy bum, Willy takes Biff's failure and lack of ambition as a reflection of his abilities as a father.

DIAMONDS

To Willy, diamonds represent tangible wealth and, hence, both validation of one's labor (and life) and the ability to pass material goods on to one's offspring, two things that Willy desperately craves. Correlatively, diamonds, the discovery of which made Ben a fortune, symbolize Willy's failure as a salesman. Despite Willy's belief in the American Dream, a belief unwavering to the extent that he passed up the opportunity to go with Ben to Alaska, the Dream's promise of financial security has eluded Willy. At the end of the play, Ben encourages Willy to enter the "jungle" finally and retrieve this elusive diamond that is, to kill himself for insurance money in order to make his life meaningful.

LINDA'S AND THE WOMAN'S STOCKINGS

Willy's strange obsession with the condition of Linda's stockings foreshadows his later flashback to Biff's discovery of him and The Woman in their Boston hotel room. The teenage Biff accuses Willy of giving away Linda's stockings to The Woman. Stockings assume a metaphorical weight as the symbol of betrayal and sexual infidelity. New stockings are important for both Willy's pride in being financially successful and thus able to provide for his family and for Willy's ability to ease his guilt about, and suppress the memory of, his betrayal of Linda and Biff.

THE RUBBER HOSE

The rubber hose is a stage prop that reminds the audience of Willy's desperate attempts at suicide. He has apparently attempted to kill himself by inhaling gas, which is, ironically, the very substance essential to one of the most basic elements with which he must equip his home for his family's health and comfort heat. Literal death by inhaling gas parallels the metaphorical death that Willy feels in his struggle to afford such a basic necessity.

14.7 MOTIFS

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

MYTHIC FIGURES

Willy's tendency to mythologize people contributes to his deluded understanding of the world. He speaks of Dave Singleman as a legend and imagines that his death must have been beautifully noble. Willy compares Biff and Happy to the mythic Greek figures Adonis and Hercules because he believes that his sons are pinnacles of "personal attractiveness" and power through "well liked"-ness; to him, they seem the very incarnation of the American Dream. Willy's mythologizing proves quite nearsighted, however. Willy fails to realize the hopelessness of Single man's lonely, on-the-job, on-the-road death. Trying to achieve what he considers to be Single man's heroic status, Willy commits himself to a pathetic death and meaningless legacy (even if Willy's life insurance policy ends up paying off, Biff wants nothing to do with Willy's ambition for him). Similarly, neither Biff nor Happy ends up leading an ideal, godlike life; while Happy does believe in the American Dream, it seems likely that he will end up no better off than the decidedly godlike Willy.

THE AMERICAN WEST, ALASKA, AND THE AFRICAN JUNGLE

These regions represent the potential of instinct to Biff and Willy. Willy's father found success in Alaska and his brother, Ben, became rich in Africa; these exotic locales, especially when compared to Willy's banal Brooklyn neighborhood, crystallize how Willy's obsession with the commercial world of the city has trapped him in an unpleasant reality. Whereas Alaska and the African jungle symbolize Willy's failure, the American West, on the other hand, symbolizes Biff's potential. Biff realizes that he has been content only when working on farms, out in the open. His westward escape from both Willy's delusions and the commercial world of the eastern United States suggests a nineteenth-century pioneer mentality Biff, unlike Willy, recognizes the importance of the individual.

14.8 GLOSSARY

- **Adonis** any very handsome young man.
- **anemia** a condition in which there is a reduction of the number, or volume, of red blood corpuscles or of the total amount of hemoglobin in the bloodstream, resulting in paleness, generalized weakness.
- **babble** to make incoherent sounds, as a baby does; to prattle or talk too much or foolishly.
- **bastard** a slang term for a person regarded with contempt, hatred, pity, resentment, and so on.
- **blow** [Informal] to brag; boast.
- **buck up** [Informal]to cheer up.

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- **buckle down** to apply oneself energetically; set to work with effort.
- **build** to form a sequence according to suit, number, etc.
- **caliber** degree of worth or value of a person or thing; quality or ability.
- **chippie** [Slang] a promiscuous young woman or a prostitute.
- **contemptuous** full of contempt; scornful or disdainful.
- **crack** to hit or strike with a sudden, sharp blow or impact.
- **cut and dried** an expression meaning "strictly business" without time for or need of pleasantries.
- **dime a dozen** an expression used to imply that something is available in large quantities. The fact that the item is not rare suggests that it is not of great value.
- **exhibitions** public shows or displays, as of art, industrial products, athletic feats, and so on.
- **Hercules** in Greek and Roman myth, the son of Zeus and Alcmene, renowned for his strength and courage, especially, as shown in his performance of twelve labors imposed on him.
- **Ignoramus** an ignorant and stupid person.
- **immerse** to absorb deeply; engross.
- **incipient** in the first stage of existence; just beginning to exist or to come to notice.
- **initiative** the action of taking the first step or move; responsibility for beginning or originating.
- **insinuate** to introduce or work into gradually, indirectly, and artfully.
- **liable** subject to the possibility of; likely.
- **lick** to overcome, vanquish, or control.
- **like** here the meaning is closer to likeable, having qualities that inspire liking; easy to like because attractive, pleasant, genial, and so on.
- **louse** [Slang] a person regarded as mean, contemptible, etc.
- **massacre** to kill indiscriminately and mercilessly and in large numbers.
- **mutt** a mixed-breed dog; an insult if applied to an individual.
- **open sesame** any unfailing means of gaining admission or achieving some other end; these words were spoken to open the door of the thieves' den in the story of Ali Baba in *The Arabian Nights*.
- **philander** to engage lightly in passing love affairs; make love insincerely.
- **requiem** a Mass for one or more deceased persons; any musical service, hymn, or dirge for the dead.
- **ruddiness** a red or reddish color or complexion.

- **ruin** to deprive (a woman) of chastity.
- **saccharine** a sugar substitute in diabetic diets.
- **self-centered** occupied or concerned only with one's own affairs; egocentric; selfish.
- **self-reliance** reliance on one's own judgment, abilities, etc.
- **simonize** to wax and polish a car.
- **spewing** throwing up (something) from or as from the stomach; vomiting.
- **spite** a mean or evil feeling toward another, characterized by the inclination to hurt, humiliate, annoy, frustrate, and so on; ill will; malice.
- **strudel** a kind of pastry; here the term refers to a prostitute.
- **surly** bad-tempered; sullenly rude; hostile and uncivil.
- **temporary** for a time only; not permanent.
- **thunderstruck** struck with amazement.
- **tired to the death** an expression meaning exhausted. Here, the phrase can also be interpreted literally because Willy has attempted suicide several times and is planning to try again.
- **undercurrent** an underlying tendency, opinion, etc., usually one that is kept hidden and not expressed openly.
- **worm** an abject, wretched, or contemptible person.

14.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Critical Essays: Major Themes in *Death of a Salesman*

Death of a Salesman addresses loss of identity and a man's inability to accept change within him and society. The play is a montage of memories, dreams, confrontations, and arguments, all of which make up the last 24 hours of Willy Loman's life. The three major themes within the play are denial, contradiction, and order versus disorder. Each member of the Loman family is living in denial or perpetuating a cycle of denial for others. Willy Loman is incapable of accepting the fact that he is a mediocre salesman. Instead Willy strives for his version of the American dream — success and notoriety even if he is forced to deny reality in order to achieve it. Instead of acknowledging that he is not a well-known success, Willy retreats into the past and chooses to relive past memories and events in which he is perceived as successful.

For example, Willy's favorite memory is of Biff's last football game because Biff vows to make a touchdown just for him. In this scene in the past, Willy can hardly wait to tell the story to his buyers. He considers himself famous as a result of his son's pride in him. Willy's sons, Biff and Happy, adopt Willy's habit of denying or manipulating reality and practice it all of their lives, much to their

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detriment. It is only at the end of the play that Biff admits he has been a "phony" too, just like Willy. Linda is the only character that recognizes the Loman family lives in denial; however, she goes along with Willy's fantasies in order to preserve his fragile mental state.

The second major theme of the play is contradiction. Throughout the play, Willy's behavior is riddled with inconsistencies. In fact, the only thing consistent about Willy is his inconsistency. From the very beginning of Act I, Scene 1, Willy reveals this tendency. He labels Biff a "lazy bum" but then contradicts himself two lines later when he states, "And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff he's not lazy." Willy's contradictions often confuse audiences at the beginning of the play; however, they soon become a trademark of his character. Willy's inconsistent behavior is the result of his inability to accept reality and his tendency to manipulate or re-create the past in an attempt to escape the present. For example, Willy cannot resign himself to the fact that Biff no longer respects him because of Willy's affair. Rather than admit that their relationship is irreconcilable, Willy retreats to a previous time when Biff admired and respected him. As the play continues, Willy disassociates himself more and more from the present as his problems become too numerous to deal with.

The third major theme of the play, which is order versus disorder, results from Willy's retreats into the past. Each time Willy loses himself in the past, he does so in order to deny the present, especially if the present is too difficult to accept. As the play progresses, Willy spends more and more time in the past as a means of reestablishing order in his life. The more fragmented and disastrous reality becomes the more necessary it is for Willy to create an alternative reality, even if it requires him to live solely in the past. This is demonstrated immediately after Willy is fired. Ben appears, and Willy confides "nothing's working out. I don't know what to do." Ben quickly shifts the conversation to Alaska and offers Willy a job. Linda appears and convinces Willy that he should stay in sales, just like Dave Single man. Willy's confidence quickly resurfaces, and he is confident that he has made the right decision by turning down Ben's offer; he is certain he will be a success like Single man. Thus, Willy's memory has distracted him from the reality of losing his job.

Denial, contradiction, and the quest for order versus disorder comprise the three major themes of *Death of a Salesman*. All three themes work together to create a dreamlike atmosphere in which the audience watches a man's identity and mental stability slip away. The play continues to affect audiences because it allows them to hold a mirror up to themselves. Willy's self-deprecation, sense of failure, and overwhelming regret are emotions that an audience can relate to because everyone has experienced them at one time or another. Individuals continue to react to *Death of a Salesman* because Willy's situation is not unique: He made a mistake a mistake that irrevocably changed his relationship with the people he loves most and when all of his attempts to eradicate his mistake fail, he makes one grand attempt to correct the mistake. Willy vehemently denies Biff's claim that

they are both common, ordinary people, but ironically, it is the universality of the play which makes it so enduring. Biff's statement, "I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you" is true after all.

Critical Essays: Miller's Manipulation of Time and Space

Miller often experiments with narrative style and technique. For example, Miller includes lengthy exposition pieces that read as stage directions within *The Crucible*. At first glance, it seems that an audience must either read the information in the program or listen to a long-winded narrator. Upon further inspection however, it becomes apparent that Miller's inclusion of background material allows actors and directors to study character motivation and internalize the information, thereby portraying it in the performance.

Miller provides audiences with a unique experience when it comes to *Death of a Salesman*. In many ways, the play appears traditional. In other words, there are actors who interact with one another, there is a basic plot line, and the play contains standard dramatic elements such as exposition, rising action, conflict, climax, and so forth. However, Miller's manipulation of time and space creates a very non-traditional atmosphere that is unsettling but effective because it mirrors Willy's mental state, thereby allowing the audience to witness his mental instability and take part in it. Stage directions call for a complete house for the Lomans. An audience will not simply watch the action take place in the kitchen but can observe several rooms within the home. This sounds as if it would be distracting since an audience can view several things at once. After all, what should the audience look at? If more than one character is on stage, whom should the audience pay attention to? Miller solves this problem through lighting. Only characters that are talking or involved in direct action are lit on stage, all other rooms, characters, and props remain in shadow.

The result is a vast number of rooms and props that can be utilized immediately. The audience does not have to wait while a new set is erected or an old one torn down, but instead moves directly and instantaneously into the next scene. Such movement without the benefit of time delays or dialogue transitions produces a disjointed and fragmented sequence of events, much like a dream. In fact, the stage directions in Act I describe the house as follows: "An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream arising out of reality."

Miller does not stop there. Even though the action of the play can shift from one part of the house to another without delay, the action is still limited to the present. Willy's dreams, memories, or recollections of past events must be revealed in a manner that is distinct from actions taking place in the present. This is important for two reasons: First, the audience must be able to differentiate between the present and the past in order to follow the action of the play; second, Willy's increased agitation must be apparent to the audience, and there is no better way to reveal it than to have the audience observe his inability to separate the past from the reality of the present. Miller achieves this effect by manipulating the space and

boundaries of the rooms. When action takes place in the present, characters observe wall boundaries and enter and exit through the doors. During Willy's recollections of the past, characters do not observe wall boundaries, and the action generally takes place in the area at the front of the stage, rather than inside the house. As a result, the audience can distinguish present events from Willy's memories. For example, in Act I, Scene 3, Willy pours a glass of milk in the kitchen, sits down, and begins to mumble to himself. He is in the present. He then remembers a past conversation with the teenage Biff and resumes the conversation. Since this is a past event, Willy directs his speech through the wall to a point offstage. This cues the audience that Willy is digressing in the past.

Sound is also used to create a dreamlike state for both Willy and the audience. A flute melody is associated with Willy, Ben has his own music, laughter cues the Woman, and so forth. Once the sound is introduced with the appropriate character, the audience automatically associates the sound with that same character. As a result, Miller is able to prompt reactions and expectations from the audience, whether they are aware or not. For example, in Act II, Scene 14, it appears that things have finally been settled between Willy and Biff. Even though Biff is leaving in the morning, he and Willy have reconciled. This puts the audience at ease, but once Ben's music is heard, it is evident that the play has not reached its final conclusion. In fact, Ben's appearance may create anxiety for the audience because it suggests an alternate, more disturbing, end to the play.

As the play progresses, the action shifts to the front of the stage. In other words, the audience becomes increasingly aware that the majority of the action is taking place inside Willy's head. It is difficult enough to watch an individual lose his or her identity. It is extremely unsettling and disturbing to be forced to experience the individual's memories, illusions, or perhaps delusions resulting in mental instability. Miller takes that into consideration and then pushes his audiences to the extreme. As Willy's mental state declines, the audience is forced to watch and to react. As a result, the play may be called *Death of a Salesman*, but it is a death observed and experienced by every member of the audience.

Willy Loman is constantly reminiscing and thinking about the past. Why? What effect does this have on him and on the play?

To an unusual degree, *The Death of a Salesman* interweaves past and present action. Willy Loman, the play's protagonist, repeatedly revisits old memories, sometimes even conflating them with the present moment. But these memories are not the sentimental, slightly melancholy daydreams of a contented man. Instead, they are the dark clues to Willy's present state of mental and emotional disrepair. Miller uses the extended flashbacks to show both that Willy longs to understand himself, and also that his efforts to do so are doomed.

Willy revisits the past not in an effort to sink into happy memories, but in an effort to analyze himself and understand where his life went wrong. His flashbacks are hardly comforting flights into idealized past times. Rather, they are harrowing

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journeys that get to the heart of his dysfunction. When Willy thinks about the old days, he remembers making light of Biff's thieving, barking at Linda about the state of her stockings, ignoring Biff's mistreatment of young women, sidelining Happy, and so on. Each of these memories lays bare one of Willy's shortcomings: his failure to instill strong morals in his sons, his guilt over his adultery, his inability to see Biff objectively, and his unequal love for Biff and Happy, respectively. If Willy's dips into the past were purely escapist, he would fixate on the happy moments in his life. Instead, he tends to be drawn to the times at which he behaved in revealingly unpleasant ways. This tendency suggests that Willy longs for self-knowledge. He wants to figure out how he got into his present mess, and he knows that the answers lie in the past.

Paradoxically, the very strength of Willy's impulse to understand him scuttles his efforts at gaining self-knowledge. In his ineffectual desperation to understand what went wrong, he becomes subsumed by the past. Instead of remaining firmly rooted in the present and thinking about how the past applies to the life he is now living, he pulls his memories over his head like a blanket. Miller brings this absorption to life by fully dramatizing Willy's flashbacks.

They are not narrated in the first person or addressed to the audience, as might befit events that occurred in the past and are at a remove. Rather, they are played out as fully realized scenes, just as vital and urgent as the present-day scenes are. By dramatizing Willy's memories, Miller makes them as vivid for us as they are for Willy. Miller suggests that while Willy might benefit from sticking a toe into the waters of the past, he begins to lose his grip on sanity when he plunges in those waters completely. Willy's efforts at self-analysis are doomed not just because he gives himself wholly to his memories, but also because his passionate emotions are not balanced by cool critical thinking. Willy is constitutionally incapable of analyzing his own behavior, understanding his character, and comprehending the mistakes he has made. Over and over, Miller shows how Willy plunges back into the past, stares uncomprehendingly at the errors he made, and then makes those identical errors in the present.

He remembers idealizing Ben as a boy; then he describes Ben in outsized, glowing terms to his sons. He remembers implying that Biff did not need to work hard in order to attend a good college; then he bridles at the implication that his parenting has something to do with Biff's failure. Willy dimly senses that his past missteps have a bearing on the present, but he cannot bring himself to make the connections explicit. Willy Loman has a multitude of faults, but escapism is not one of them. He truly wants to understand himself; part of his tragedy is that he is incapable of doing so.

14.10 FURTHER STUDY QUESTIONS

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How does Willy's home function as a metaphor for his ambitions?

When Willy and Linda purchased their home, the neighborhood was quieter than they now find it. The house was surrounded by space and sunlight. Willy was a young man with ambitious hopes for the future, and his house represented a space in which he could expand his dreams. In the present, the house is hemmed in on all sides by apartment units. Willy is a much older man, and his chances of achieving his dreams are much slimmer. His home now represents the reduction of his hopes. There is less room to expand, and the sunlight does not even reach into his yard. In the past, the house was the site of hopeful departure and triumphant return. Willy would set out each week to make a load of money. When he returned, his worshipful sons greeted him, and he whispered into their eager ears his hopes to open his own business. Now, the house is the site of Willy's frustrated ambitions. When the play opens, Willy returns to his home a defeated man, unable to complete his latest business trip, and with his argument with Biff left unresolved.

What role does the fear of abandonment play in Willy's life?

Willy's obsession with making his family conforms to the ideals of the American Dream seems rooted in the childhood emotional trauma of his abandonment by his father. Since his father left him with nothing, Willy feels an acute need to put his sons especially Biff on the right path in life. He convinces himself that he is capable of doing so, which leads to his inflated sense of self-importance (as when he tells his young sons about how well known he is in New England). Willy's ultimate belief in the deluded prospect of Biff's imminent success causes him to trade in his own life to leave Biff $20,000. As an additional consequence of being abandoned, Willy knows little about his father and thus has to ask Ben to tell Biff and Happy about their grandfather.

Willy's fear of abandonment is probably also responsible for his obsession with being well liked. Somewhat childlike, Willy craves approval and reacts to any perceived hint of dislike by either throwing a tantrum or retreating into self-pity. When Ben visits Willy's home, Willy proudly shows his sons to Ben, practically begging for a word of approval. When Ben notes that he has to leave to catch his train, Willy begs him to stay a little longer. Even as an adult, Willy's relationship to Ben is fraught with this fear of abandonment. Howard abandons Willy by firing him, and after Happy and Biff abandon him in the restaurant, Willy returns home like a dejected child. After these blows, the power of Willy's fantasies to deny unpleasant facts about his reality abandons him as well.

Willy and Biff have different explanations for Biff's failure to succeed in the business world. How are their explanations different?

Willy believes that Biff's discovery of Willy's adulterous affair contributed to Biff's disillusionment with the American Dream that Willy cherishes so dearly. He

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remembers that Biff called him a "phony little fake." Essentially, Willy interprets Biff's words to mean that Biff thinks of him as a charlatan: Willy believes that his affair prevented him from selling Biff on the American Dream. On the other hand, Biff believes that he failed to succeed in business precisely because Willy sold him so successfully on the American Dream of easy success. By the time he took his first job, Biff was so convinced that success would inevitably fall into his lap that he was unwilling to work hard in order to advance to more important positions. Biff did not want to start at the bottom and deal with taking orders. He had faith in Willy's prediction that he was naturally destined to move ahead, so he made no efforts to do so through hard work, and, as a result, he failed miserably.

14.11 SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Write an essay explaining Willy's philosophy "Be liked and you will never want." How does this statement apply to Willy? To Charley? To Howard? To Bernard?
2. Biff claims he has made every attempt to avoid wasting his life, but he feels like a failure every time he returns home. What type of life or career would make Biff feel successful? Why is he so critical of himself whenever he returns to New York?
3. Compare and contrast Willy's conflicting images of Biff. Why does he defend him and criticize him?
4. Write an essay analyzing Biff's tendency to steal. What compels him to steal? How do his actions shape his future?
5. Explain Happy's obsession with women. Why does he pursue so many women, especially women associated with his employers? How do Happy's affairs relate to Willy's affair?
6. Linda states "life is a casting off." Explain her statement in relation to the play. Who or what is casting off? Or is being cast off? Focus on Willy, Linda, Biff, and Happy.
7. Compare and contrast Willy's death with Dave single man's death. What does it mean to die "the death of a salesman" and did Willy achieve that?
8. Think about the significance of Miller's narrative technique. Memories and illusions make up a large portion of the play. How do they affect the play? Consider such things as the story line, character interaction, and overall audience reaction.
9. Willy recalls his sons' teenage years as an idyllic past. What evidence can we find to show that the past is not as idyllic as Willy imagines it to be?
10. What evidence can we find to show that Willy may have chosen a profession that is at odds with his natural inclinations?

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11. Why does Willy reject Charley's job offer?
12. How does Willy's interview with Howard reveal that Willy transfers his professional anxieties onto his relationship with his family and conflates the professional and personal realms of his life?
13. What evidence can we find to show that Willy misses the distinction between being loved and being well liked? What are the consequences of Willy's failure to distinguish between the two?
14. How is Willy's retreat into the past a form of escape from his unpleasant present reality? How does it function as a way for Willy to cope with the failure to realize his ambitions?
15. How does Willy's desperate quest for the American Dream resemble a religious crusade?

UNIT 15 THE HAIRY APE - EUGENE O'NEILL

Structure

15.0 INTRODUCTION

The Hairy Ape is a 1922 expressionist play by American playwright Eugene O'Neill. It is about a beastly, unthinking laborer known as Yank, the protagonist of the play, as he searches for a sense of belonging in a world controlled by the rich. At first, Yank feels secure as he stokes the engines of an ocean liner, and is highly confident in his physical power over the ship's engines and his men.

However, when the rich daughter of an industrialist in the steel business refers to him as a "filthy beast", Yank undergoes a crisis of identity and so starts his mental and physical deterioration. He leaves the ship and wanders into Manhattan, only to find he does not belong anywhere neither with the socialites on Fifth Avenue, nor with the labor organizers on the waterfront. In a fight for social belonging, Yank's mental state disintegrates into animalistic, and in the end he is defeated by an ape in which Yank's character has been reflected. *The Hairy Ape* is a portrayal of the impact industrialization and social class has on the dynamic character Yank.

15.1 OBJECTIVE

O'Neill based the play in part on a real man, an Irish sailor named Driscoll, whom he roomed with in New York. O'Neill had been terribly impressed by the gruff older man's confident and manly view of life and was duly shocked to hear some years later that Driscoll had committed suicide by jumping from a ship. The play at once represents a personal attempt to come to terms with this suicide and the playwright's finding in the drama of the demise of a manual laborer an essential story of humanity in modern society.

15.2 AUTHOR INTRODUCTION

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Eugene O'Neill is perhaps one of the best-known American playwrights of all time, and received numerous accolades throughout his lengthy career. He is best categorized as a playwright in the realist school, and is credited with bringing realism, a dramatic technique initially employed by the European playwrights Anton Chekhov and Henrik Ibsen, to the United States. He often wrote about Americans living in desperate conditions, and his play *Long Day's Journey into Nigh*t is considered one of the greatest American plays of all time.

O'Neill was born in New York City, at a hotel called the Barrett House, the son of Irish immigrants, James O'Neill and Mary Ellen Quinlan. His father was an actor, and so was often on tour, and Eugene grew up with an awareness of and appreciation for the theater. He started his undergraduate studies at Harvard University, but left after a year to move to New York City, where he became entrenched in the Greenwich Village literary scene. He first harnessed his abilities as a playwright on Cape Cod with the Provincetown Players in 1916. The Provincetown Players had theaters in Provincetown and Greenwich Village, and they frequently produced O'Neill's work.

Beyond the Horizon was O'Neill's first play to premiere on Broadway, in 1920, and won the Pulitzer. That same year, he wrote *The Emperor Jones*, which premiered to great acclaim. His other plays include *Anna Christie, Desire Under the Elms, The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey into Night, A Moon for the Misbegotten, Strange Interlude, Mourning Becomes Electra,* and *Ah, Wilderness!,* a comedy.

In spite of his success, O'Neill had an unhappy personal life, with marital struggles and estranged relationships with his children. Additionally, he suffered from alcoholism and depression. In 1936, he won the Noel Prize in Literature. In 1953, he died at the age of 65 in a hotel in Boston.

15.3 CHARACTERS

ROBERT "YANK" SMITH

He was Born on the Brooklyn waterfront to a longshoreman father, Yank ran away from home to escape beatings and his parents' fighting. He also worked on the waterfront until he shipped off as a stoker, thus beginning the only life he has ever known. He is proud as the strongest among the stokers, but his encounter with Mildred sends him into a spiral of doubt and rage.

PADDY

An Irish stoker on the ocean liner who seems to have lost hope in the world and wishes for the more glorious days of sailing when the love of the sea was what

drove a man. He alone is able to exert some sort of influence over the stubborn Yank.

LONG

Long is a stoker on the ocean liner who tries to convince Yank, as well as the other stokers, to believe in the Socialist cause, stressing to Yank that it is not a solution found by brute force but by persuasion and the peaceful uprising of the working class. He takes Yank to Fifth Avenue to try to awaken class consciousness in him, but finds that Yank only goes straight for violence.

MILDRED DOUGLAS

The daughter of the president of the Steel Trust, she expresses a desire to "know how the other half lives" by witnessing the working class in its element. In this way, she desires to find her place in the world and give herself a purpose somehow by helping the less fortunate, though, despite this, O'Neill describes her as insincere and pretentious. She is ultimately disgusted and terrified by Yank's composure and outburst, calling him a "filthy beast" and sending him on his quest to avenge his honor throughout the play.

MILDRED'S AUNT

Mildred's very reluctant chaperone on her trip to England, she finds her niece to be a poser.

SECOND ENGINEER

He takes Mildred down to the stokehole, though he is clearly very uncomfortable with her excursion. He feels intimidated by her higher class.

GUARD

A prison guard at Blackwell prison, he tells the prisoners to keep quiet, and when Yank starts yelling, he hoses him.

SECRETARY OF THE I.W.W.

He is the primary representative for the International Workers of the World, O'Neill's general example of a worker's union. As he listens to Yank's understanding of what the organization does, he becomes convinced rivals, in an attempt to mock or else spy on the union, have sent Yank rather than Yank coming of his own volition.

STOKERS/FIREMEN

Workers in the stokehole on the ocean liner, they seem to be sheep easily led by whoever is the strongest leader of the pack, usually Yank. They often tease other members of their crew in unison, which makes their voices take on a "brazen, metallic quality" as if their throats were gramophones.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF FIFTH AVENUE

Citizens of the Upper Class, they are consumed by their own greed and materialism, completely blocking out anything that is not of their kind, like Yank. They only notice Yank when he becomes an obstacle to them living the life they are accustomed and are quick to remove him forcibly when this happens.

15.4 SUMMARY

The firemen, workers who shovel coal into the engine of a Transatlantic Ocean Liner, sit in the forecastle of the ship drinking and carrying on with each other. They are an hour out of New York City and have seven more days aboard ship. The men are burly and muscular. Yank, the fiercest looking of the men, sits in the foreground quietly. Whenever Yank speaks the men immediately hush. Yank asks for a beer and the men immediately give one to him. As Yank and the men drink, Yank remains in control as the leader of the group. Yank and the men joke about thinking as they drink. Yank, in a joke repeated during the play, tells the men to be quiet because he is trying to "tink." The men mockingly repeat after him, "think" and then erupt into a chorus of "Drink, don't think!" Cutting through the general mayhem, a drunken tenor sings a tune about his lass at home. Talk of home outside the ocean liner infuriates Yank and he tells the tenor to be quiet. Long, quite drunk, stands up and makes a Marxist speech, preaching to the men that if the ship is home, their home is hell and the Upper Class put them there. Yank tells him to join the Salvation Army and get a soapbox. Paddy, a wise, older fireman tells the men that life on an Ocean Liner is hell by comparison to his life on a Clipper Ship. Paddy reminisces about the freedom he enjoyed, the purpose he had and skill for which he was valued. Yank tells Paddy that he is dead, "living in the past of dreams" and glorifies his own job as the strength of the ship's speed and force.

Mildred and her Aunt lounge on the promenade deck of the Ocean Liner. Mildred and her Aunt discuss Mildred's need to do service for the poor. Mildred worked with the poor in Manhattan's Lower East Side and is currently on her way to do more service projects in Europe. Mildred's Aunt characterizes Mildred's service as "slumming" and does not understand why she has to do it internationally. Mildred's Aunt tells Mildred that her service work just makes the poor feel poorer. Mildred is currently waiting for the second engineer to take her down into the stokehole. Mildred told a lie that her father, the president of Nazareth Steel, has given her permission. When he arrives, the second Engineer escorts Mildred, clad in a white dress she refused to change out of, down into the stokehole.

Yank and the men are hard at work shoveling coal in the noisy stokehole at the opening of Scene Three. Yank leads the men at work. The men take a break and an anonymous whistle-blower overhead in the darkness commands the men to keep working. In a rage, Yank screams up at the whistle-blower. Yank suddenly realizes that the men have stopped working. Still fuming, Yank turns to face Mildred.

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At the sight of Yank, Mildred whimpers for the men to take her away from the filthy beast and faints into the arms of the engineers.

The men have again gathered in the stokehold in Scene Four. They replay and rehash the Mildred scene and mock Yank, the "filthy beast." Paddy tells Yank Mildred looked at him like he was a big "hairy ape." Infuriated, Yank lunges toward the door to find Mildred, but is restrained by the other Firemen.

Yank and Long have traveled to 5th Avenue in New York City in Scene Five. Long means to show Yank that all upper class people are like Mildred. Yank tries to attract attention to him by bumping into people and accosting a young woman, but receives no response but "I beg your pardon." Finally, Yank is arrested because he makes a Gentleman miss his bus. Yank is imprisoned on Blackwell's Island and converses with the other prisoners in Scene Six. The men tell him that if he wants to get even with Mildred and her father's company he should join the Wobblies or the Industrial Workers of the World. Yank realizes that Mildred's father built both the physical and metaphorical cage he is trapped in. In a fury, Yank actually bends the bars of his cell, but is restrained by the guards.

Yank visits the local I.W.W. in Scene Seven, but is rejected because the Secretary thinks he is a governmental spy. Yank's radicalism, willingness to blow things up and preoccupation with "belonging" make them suspicious of him. Yank is thrown out on the street. Yank spends the night at the Battery and the next morning visits the Monkey House at the Zoo. In Scene Eight, Yank attempts to befriend the ape. He tells the ape that they are alike both caged and taunted. Yank believes he and the ape belong to the same club and calls him brother. Yank releases the gorilla from his cage and approaches the ape to shake his hand. The gorilla springs on Yank, crushes Yank with his massive arms and then tosses Yank into his cage. Yank dies in the gorilla's cage.

15.5 THEMES

CLASS CONFLICT

As the socialist stoker, Long tells his fellow workers in a brief soapbox speech, and Yank personally when the two visit Madison Avenue in New York, that he believes they should realize the terrible state of their living and working conditions, and realize the societal forces that determine them. According to Long, who is portrayed by O'Neill as a one dimensional, ideology-defined character, everything that is wrong in the lives of the workers is the fault of the capitalist class, whom they should therefore overthrow. Yank and one senses O'Neill himself is averse by disposition to any view that accepts that there are forces outside of oneself that one cannot overcome by blunt force, but because of this he comes up with a truly bizarre idea: "I mean blow up de factory, de woiks, where he makes de steel. Dat's what I'm after—to blow up de steel, knock all de steel in de woild up to de

moon. Dat'll fix tings". As the Wobblies who throw him out on to the street after hearing this know, this sort of thinking is almost a parody of the socialist work they do.

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SUSPICION AGAINST IDEOLOGIES

One of the defining facets of Yank's individualism is that he does not believe in anything except his own strength. When other people have ideas that seem too sophisticated and conceptual, especially when they try to explain suffering in the world, Yank can only see them as weak and cowardly. After Long's socialist speech, Yank reacts with great sarcasm and contempt: "De Bible, huh? De Cap'tlist class, huh? Aw nix on dat Salvation Army-Socialist bull. Git a soapbox! Hire a hall! Come and be saved, huh? Jerk us to Jesus, huh? Aw g'wan! I've listened to lots of guys like you, see. Yuh're all wrong. Wanter know what I t'ink? Yuh ain't no good for no one. Yuh're de bunk. Yuh ain't got no noive, get me? Yuh're yellow, dat's what. Yellow, dat's you" (44). Yank hasn't actually made an argued rebuttal, but like a bully, he has silenced and humiliated Long just by sheer force.

MECHANIZATION AND DEHUMANIZATION

At the end of his long elegy to the past age of sailing, Paddy levels a challenge to the machine-loving Yank, posing against the latter's modernist faith in the empowering potential of the machine a romantic respect for a kind of essential humanity. Yank contemptuously rejects Paddy's ideas at first, but then throughout the rest of the play he comes to realize that machine civilization in fact deprives him of his power and furthermore of his humanity. Yank is only able to see the truth of the importance Paddy places on basic humanity when he has already lost it himself; by that point Yank thinks despairing that he has had none to begin with.

MALE CAMARADERIE

Although Yank is a dogged individualist and a man confident in the powers of his own body, O'Neill makes it clear to us that not only is he dependent on machines, which eventually emasculate him, but also the affirmation of his fellow working men, who eventually abandon him. Yank himself only realizes this too late, when he is thrown out of the IWW meeting; in a sense, he has taken masculinity to so extreme an extent that he alienates those men whom he used to impress and stand before as a model.

SOCIAL DARWINISM

The worldview espoused by Yank, even though it may seem to smack of classical Greek tragic heroism, is driven by a kind of aggressively modern ideology that finds one of its most frightening expressions in the idea of Social Darwinism. Twisting the contingent and purposeless notion of natural selection and fitness that Charles Darwin introduced in his *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Herbert Spencer and others saw evolution as a life-or-death competition of strength in which only the

strong would survive; significant is the secularism of this worldview, in which everything is reduced to natural phenomena and no higher ideals remain. For Yank, so long as he feels like the top dog, his world seems to function perfectly; however, once he finds himself in a position of impotence the sort of situation for which he would have mercilessly criticized another he implicitly senses the emptiness of the way he looks at life.

ALIENATION OF LABOR

Karl Marx in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* famously described how labor/work means something entirely different for workers in modern capitalistic society in contrast to premodern workers. On the steamship, even though Yank and the other stokers may feel a great sense of confidence in their own physical strength, they do not own the furnaces they feed, let alone the entire transatlantic liner. Thus, they are dependent upon the business owners in order to be able to have work at all. Moreover, the product of their work does not really go to the end of sustaining themselves; the ship takes its passengers across the Atlantic, but the stokers must stay, as opposed to a farmer who plants to feed his family.

MOCKERY

O'Neill is known as a very dark playwright who broods on the conditions of abjection and despair, but this is at once tempered and deepened by his acerbic wit. In *The Hairy Ape*, even though Yank is one of the least educated characters and certainly the one who values cerebral intelligence the least, he is also the one in whom O'Neill invests his most powerful sarcasm. Yank does not just beat up others to assert dominance over them; with a kind of laugh of superiority, which French poet Charles Baudelaire described in his essay "On the Nature of Laughter," Yank maintains his position mainly by a combination of mockery and threats. Just how essential these were to his character can be heard in his very last words, which almost address the audience directly, mocking them as carnival-goers and mocking himself as a hapless caged ape.

HISTORICAL CHANGE

The character of Paddy serves as both a kind of father figure and a foil to Yank. Having worked on sail ships in an age before steamships, in which sailors felt themselves both much more actively involved in the mechanics and processes of the ship and closer to the nature they traversed, Paddy is more aware than the younger man of the changes wrought upon the sailing experience by the introduction of modern mechanization. He tries to impress this higher perspective of historical difference upon Yank, but the latter is too absorbed in the ecstasy of present strength to realize, until it is too late, the old man's lesson: the machine invigorates, but it also dominates and cages.

15.6 MOTIFS

NOTES

BELONGING

The motif and idea of who "belongs" and the idea of "belonging" are continually reinforced throughout *The Hairy Ape.* Yank equates "belonging" with power and importance and uses "belonging" as a way to reverse societal power structures. In Scene One, Yank claims that he "belongs" to the ship, as opposed to the passengers in first class who are merely "baggage." Yank also associates "belonging" with an individual's usefulness and functionality. The firemen "belong" because they make the ship run and are essential to its workings.

Yank is especially affected by Mildred because she presents a world and class which he cannot belong to. After their meeting, the play essentially follows Yank in his quest to find belonging, finally leading him to the monkey- house at the zoo.

THOUGHT

For Yank, thought is the ultimate boundary. Whether pressing his fingers to his head or sitting in the position of Rodin's "The Thinker," he cannot muster enough thought to make sense of or come to peace with the world around him. Thought only becomes necessary for Yank after he encounters Mildred in the stokehole. Mildred and he class present a new threat that Yank cannot eliminate or get rid of by physical might. Yank is forced to think how he can defend himself. This transition is exemplified in the "tink" joke among the men. Before Mildred enters the stokehole Yank finds thinking ridiculous and unnecessary, he laughs when he tells the other men he is "trying to tink." However, after the encounter, Yank earnestly tells the men that he is trying to "tink." When they joke and correct him in a mocking chorus, "Think!," he is genuinely hurt.

Yank's inability to think not only reveals his regression to a lower animal form, but also renders him unable to adapt to or defend himself in the world beyond the ship.

LANGUAGE

Yank's idiosyncratic speech, characterized by chopped and mangled words eliminate the possibility of Yank's successes or acceptance in a world or class other than his own. His deformed language makes real communication impossible. Ann Massa in "Intention and Effect in *The Hairy Ape"* puts it quite beautifully, "Yank can only break the bounds of his vocabulary and his style in the same violent and ultimately frustrated way that he bends the bars of his cell he can't break the mould of the apparently flexible yet imprisoning medium that is language and that is life." Yank's speech defines his class and place in society—rigid, unchanging and binding.

SETTING

The settings and environments of *The Hairy Ape* reveal larger social and cultural realities. Yank and the Firemen exist within the cramped and hot forecastle and stokehole, described as a formidable cage. In contrast, Mildred and her Aunt's environment, the Promenade Deck of the ship, is filled with fresh air and sun. The ocean that surrounds them is infinitely spacious and the general feeling of freedom abounds. The promenade deck is also symbolically situated above at the top of the ship, far above the stokehole. Both the stokehole and the promenade deck setting epitomize the lifestyles and characteristics of the ship's literal decks and subsequent upper and lower classes aboard.

15.7 SYMBOLS

RODIN'S "THE THINKER"

Yank's impression of Rodin's statue, "The Thinker" is symbolic of Yank's need to think. While he physically embodies the cultural symbol of a "thinker" he cannot think himself. Every time O'Neill's stage direction calls for the actor to take the position of "The Thinker" Yank has come up against an obstacle that cannot be tackled by any other means but thought when Yank cannot process the realities before him. After Yank is thrown out of the I.W.W he immediately gets into "The Thinker" pose. He is desperate to make sense of his situation and understand why the union would throw him out

The real ape in Scene Eight is the only other character that takes "The Thinker" position. The ape sharing this habitual body position reflects on Yanks own animalistic state his mode of thought is no more advanced than the ape's.

Apes are everywhere in *The Hairy Ape*: Yank is called an ape, Yank thinks he is an ape, Mildred thinks she sees an ape, Yank tells people he is an ape, Senator Queen writes that the Wobblies will degenerate American civilization "back to the ape" and, most importantly, there is a real live ape in Scene 8. The ape symbolizes man in a primitive state before technology, complex language structures, complex thought or money was necessary. The ape represents man that is not only behind in an evolutionary sense, but is free of class, technology and other elements of modern society. The ape is only concerned with survival.

Thus Yank, constantly compared with apes, and does share some characteristics with his early primate relatives. Yank, like the ape, struggles with thought, doesn't understand the class system, has at best basic language skills and is most concerned with his survival on Earth. In addition, male apes are known to be very territorial, obstinate, bull headed and aggressive all descriptors that could be used to describe Yank.

STEEL

Steel is both a symbol of power and oppression in *The Hairy Ape.* While Yank exclaims in Scene One that he is steel, "the muscles and the punch behind it," he is all the while penned in a virtual cage of steel created by the ship around him. Steel creates other cages in the play Yank's jail cell and the cell of the Ape. Steel is also oppressive because it creates jobs like Yank's, it is symbolic of the technology that force Yank and the Firemen into slave-like jobs.

15.8 GLOSSARY

Accentuate : Make more noticeable or prominent

Acquiesce : Accept something reluctantly but without protest

Belligerent : Hostile and aggressive

Candor : The quality of being open and honest in expression; frankness

Chaperone : A person who accompanies and looks after another person or group of people, in particular

Daze : Make someone unable to think or react properly

Defiance : Disobedience

Disdainful : Showing contempt or lack of respect

Dungarees : Blue jeans or overalls

Foist : Impose an unwelcome or unnecessary person or thing

Heed : Pay attention to; take notice of

Inchoate : Just begun and so not fully formed or developed

Incongruous : Not in harmony or keeping with the surroundings or other aspects of something

Rear : The back part of something, esp. a building or vehicle

Refrain : Stop oneself from doing something

Resentful : Feeling or expressing bitterness or indignation at having been treated unfairly

Tumult : A loud, confused noise, esp. one caused by a large mass of people

Vehement : Showing strong feeling; forceful, passionate, or intense

Vitality : The state of being strong and active

Wearisome : Causing one to feel tired or bored

15.9 STUDY QUESTIONS

How does O'Neill use voices and nameless characters in the play? How do these "voices" comment on the text?

NOTES

O'Neill uses "voices" in *The Hairy Ape* to emphasize specific class structures and groups within the play. Yank aurally and physically stands out against these "voices," dramatically revealing his displacement and detachment from society at large. Yank does not "join in" with the other firemen laughing and joking in Scene One. On 5th Avenue Yank certainly does not "fit in" with the noise of the street goers, talking about church and monkey fur. And, lastly, Yank confronts voices, perhaps most strikingly, in Scene six as he sits in jail. The voices of Yank's inmates a nameless and faceless group that scorn and laugh at him. In each situation Yank encounters a force that opposes him, which he cannot "join."

How do symbols function within the *Hairy Ape?* Why do you think O'Neill chose to use such heavy symbolism in the text? How do they work thematically? Give specific examples of three symbols in the text, why you think O'Neill chose them and how they comment on theme.

Symbols within *The Hairy Ape* are an expressionistic means to communicate and indicate abstract ideas with concrete "things." For instance, Mildred's white dress symbolically represents the artificiality and detachment of the aristocracy. Her dress makes a literal black and white contrast between herself and the coal-dusted men. Another symbol, the Transatlantic Liner, reveals the world as a big boat—complete with a "first class" on the top deck and workers below in the bowels of the ship. Steel is yet another symbol in the play, simultaneously representing great strength, industrialization and the repression of the working class. These symbols are vital because they strengthen and heighten Yank's struggle and visually signify class structure and the effects of industry on the worker.

Why does O'Neill choose to place Yank in the position of Rodin's "The Thinker"? How does this comment on the life of the industrial worker and Yank's capability for thought?

Rodin's statue "The Thinker" is perhaps society's most distinguishable symbol of thought. By taking the "attitude" of the statue in the play Yank reveals his attempt to "ape" or copy thought. In reality he does not know how to do it otherwise. While he physically embodies the cultural symbol of a "thinker" he cannot think himself. Every time O'Neill's stage direction calls for the actor to take the position of "The Thinker" Yank has met an obstacle that cannot be tackled by any other means but thought—when Yank cannot process the realities before him. After Yank is thrown out of the I.W.W. he immediately gets into "The Thinker" pose. He is desperate to make sense of his situation and to understand why the union would throw him out. Because Yank cannot process the problems before him, he is sent reeling backward on the evolutionary path—unable to function in modern society. The real ape in Scene Eight is the only other character that takes "The Thinker" position. The ape is not included in the class or social structures of the human world. Like Yank, he sits in a cage and perhaps wonders how he can join the rest of society and like his human counterpart, imitates what humans define as thought. The Ape, by sharing this habitual body position reflects on Yanks own animalistic state—his mode of thought is no more advanced than the ape's.

15.10 SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

Given the unusualness of Yank's working-class background and his violent personality, how do you think O'Neill envisioned his audiences relating to the character?

Although other artistic forms such as novels and photography had well-established traditions of realist and social realist reportage and dramatization of the miseries of working-class life by the time O'Neill wrote and produced *The Hairy Ape,* drama still hewed to higher and more standard registers of speech. Thus, contemporary audiences were shocked but also deeply impressed by the feeling that they were almost right there themselves in the forecastle or stokehole overhearing the genuine conversation of men whom they would otherwise never hear in their everyday lives. However, O'Neill makes this stance very difficult by making Yank implicitly mock and threatens those who would gawk at him and his brethren from a safe distance

A script is a text meant to eventually be performed. Discuss a crucial point in the story when decisions in acting and staging could make a significant different in the meaning of the play.

Yank's monologue that takes up the entirety of Scene Eight poses a great challenge for the actor in part because of its length. However, as the stage directions make clear, Yank is also at his most conflicted in this scene and alternates frequently and abruptly between a sincere sympathy and a mocking disdain. Depending on how well the monologue is delivered, it may come across as either a boring rant or a rollercoaster ride that constantly frustrates the audience's expectations.

The issue of sexuality is not spoken about explicitly except for a few times and never takes place on the stage. Yet how would you explain its significance to Yank's emotional development?

Women are first mentioned in Scene One after discussion of the masculine culture of drinking; although Yank speaks confidently and encouragingly about the latter, when it comes to women he can only speak with disdain and veiled threats. His world, as we know from his background of hard labor since a young age, centers exclusively on a masculine world in which women are as much objects as a bottle of whiskey. However, given that Yank does not boast about women, we may infer that he has not had much experience. His shock at seeing Mildred derives from precisely this lack.

What is the significance of race in the play?

In a sense, the first significant mention of racism is in the stage directions for Scene One that specifies that although the firemen come from a variety of races, none of them are colored. They are able to band together convincingly because they are all "white"; if one were black, it would have been blatantly unrealistic, given the times, to not have a significant conflict with that character not to mention that in

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reality the man would likely not have been able to get the job in the first place. The only explicit mention of African Americans is the I.W.W. secretary's remark that they do not have a "coon" as a doorman. However, Yank, especially in his identification with apes, symbolizes a kind of social alienation that mirrors that experienced by black men.

Discuss a stylistic feature of O'Neill's stage direction writing that directly contributes to the moral drama of the play as a whole.

In the climactic Scene Eight, O'Neill specifies that the stage lights should be focused on the gorilla and Yank; all the other monkeys, like the other workers in the forecastle and stokehole scenes, are meant to fade into the dark background, so that the drama is focused on the person of Yank. However, O'Neill inverts the glorious of dramatic heroism by using the same attention, as indicated by the lights, to represent Yank's isolation and the humiliating sense of being seen by a distanced audience.

UNIT 16 CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF - TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

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Structure

16.0 INTRODUCTION

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is a play by Tennessee Williams. One of Williams's more famous works and his personal favorite, the play won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1955. Set in the "plantation home in the Mississippi Delta" of Big Daddy Pollitt, a wealthy cotton tycoon, the play examines the relationships among members of Big Daddy's family, primarily between his son Brick and Maggie the "Cat", Brick's wife.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof features motifs such as social mores, greed, superficiality, mendacity, decay, sexual desire, repression and death. Dialogue throughout is often rendered phonetically to represent accents of the Southern United States. The original production starred Barbara Bel Geddes, Burl Ives and Ben Gazzara. The play was adapted as a motion picture of the same name in 1958, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman as Maggie and Brick, with Burl Ives and Madeleine Sherwood recreating their stage roles.

16.1 OBJECTIVES

The cat refers to a particular fantasy of femininity and feminine desire. The play's primary cat is Maggie, a typically hysterical, dissatisfied Williams heroine who prostrates herself before Brick. Maggie's loneliness has made her a "cat," hard, anxious, and bitter. The exhilaration of Williams's dramaturgy lies in the force of the audience's identification with this heroine, a woman desperate in her sense of lack, masochistically bound to man who does not want her, and made all the more beautiful in her envy, longing, and dispossession.

16.2 AUTHOR INTRODUCTION

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Tennessee Williams was a master playwright of the twentieth century, and his plays *A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie,* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are considered among the finest of the American stage. At their best, his 25 full-length plays combined lyrical intensity, haunting loneliness, and hypnotic violence. He is widely considered the greatest Southern playwright and one of the greatest playwrights in the history of American drama.

Born Thomas Lanier Williams on March 26, 1911, he suffered through a difficult and troubling childhood. His father, Cornelius Williams, was a shoe salesman and an emotionally absent parent. He became increasingly abusive as the Williams children grew older. His mother, Edwina, was the daughter of a Southern Episcopal minister and had lived the adolescence and young womanhood of a spoiled Southern belle. Williams was sickly as a child, and his mother was a loving but smothering woman. In 1918, the family moved from Mississippi to St. Louis, and the change from a small provincial town to a big city was very difficult for Williams' mother. The young Williams was also influenced by his older sister Rose's emotional and mental imbalance during their childhood.

In 1929, Williams enrolled in the University of Missouri. After two years, his father withdrew him for flunking ROTC, and he took a job at his father's shoe company. He despised the job but worked at the warehouse by day and wrote late into the night. The strain was too much, and in 1935 Williams had a nervous breakdown. He recovered at his grandparents' home in Memphis, and during these years he continued to write. Amateur productions of his early plays were produced in Memphis and St. Louis.

Rose's mental health continued to deteriorate as well. During a fight between Cornelius and Edwina in 1936, Cornelius made a move towards Rose that he claimed was meant to calm her. Rose thought his overtures were sexual and suffered a terrible breakdown. Her parents had her lobotomized shortly afterward. Williams went back to school and graduated from the University of Iowa in 1938. He then moved to New Orleans, where he began going by the name Tennessee, a nickname he'd been given in college thanks to his southern drawl. After struggling with his sexuality through his youth, he finally started a new life as a gay man, with a new name, a new home, and a promising new career.

In the early 1940s, Williams moved between several cities for different jobs and playwriting classes, while also working at MGM as a scriptwriter. In 1944 came the great turning point in his career: *The Glass Menagerie*. First produced in Chicago to great success, the play transferred to Broadway in 1945 and won the NY Critics Circle Award. While success freed Williams financially, it also made it difficult for him to write. He went to Mexico to work on a play originally titled *The Poker Night*. This play eventually became one of his masterpieces, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It won Williams a second NY Critics' Circle Award and a Pulitzer

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Prize in 1947, enabling him to travel and buy a home in Key West as an escape for both relaxation and writing. The year 1951 brought *The Rose Tattoo* and Williams' first Tony award, as well as the successful film adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Vivian Leigh.

Around this time, Williams met Frank Merlo. The two fell in love, and the young man became Williams' romantic partner until Merlo's untimely death in 1961. He was a steadying influence on Williams, who suffered from depression and lived in fear that he, like his sister Rose, would go insane. The following years were some of Williams' most productive. His plays were a great success in the United States and abroad, and he was able to write works that were well-received by critics and popular with audiences, including *The Rose Tattoo* (1950), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Night of the Iguana* (1961), and many others. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* won Williams his second Pulitzer Prize, and was his last truly great artistic and commercial success.

He gave American theatergoers unforgettable characters, an incredible vision of life in the South, and a series of powerful portraits of the human condition. He was deeply interested in something he called "poetic realism," namely the use of everyday objects which, seen repeatedly and in the right contexts, become imbued with symbolic meaning. His plays also seemed preoccupied with the extremes of human brutality and sexual behavior: madness, rape, incest, nymphomania, as well as violent and fantastic deaths. Williams himself often commented on the violence in his own work, which to him seemed part of the human condition; he was conscious, also, of the violence in his plays being expressed in a particularly American setting. The work of Edward Albee, critics who attacked the "excesses" of Williams' work often were making thinly veiled attacked on his sexuality. Homosexuality was not discussed openly at that time, but in Williams' plays the themes of desire and isolation reveal, among other things, the influence of having grown up gay in a homophobic world.

The 1960s brought hard times for Tennessee Williams. He had become dependent on drugs, and the problem only grew worse after the death of Frank Merlo in 1961. Merlo's death from lung cancer sent Williams into a deep depression that lasted ten years. Williams was also insecure about his work, which was sometimes of inconsistent quality, and he was violently jealous of younger playwrights. His sister Rose was in his thoughts during his later work. The later plays are not considered Williams' best, including the failed *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*. Overwork and drug use continued to take their toll on him, and on February 23, 1983, Williams choked to death on the lid of one of his pill bottles. He left behind an impressive body of work, including plays that continue to be performed the world over. In his worst work, his writing is melodramatic and overwrought, but at his best Tennessee Williams is a haunting, lyrical, and powerful voice and one of the most important forces in twentieth-century American drama.

16.3 CHARACTERS

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BRICK

He is a taciturn and stony-faced drunk; Brick is too numb to feel much of anything anymore. His good looks and cool aloofness have won him admirers his whole life, from his own parents to his wife Maggie, despite his inability to reciprocate their affections. Since the death of his friend Skipper, Brick has retreated into a drunken shell, and the only emotions that he can express are disgust and boredom. A rise can still be coaxed out of Brick, however, when he is goaded about Skipper.

MAGGIE

Maggie is a vivacious and attractive woman whose curse is a love for a husband who does not love her. Her one driving goal is to get Brick to sleep with her – both to satisfy her own needs, and to allow her to conceive a baby, which would cement her claim to the Pollitt family's fortune. She is deathly afraid of abandonment, both by Brick and by the comfortable lifestyle to which she has grown accustomed. Despite her self-focused interests, she is also kind and warm-hearted.

BIG DADDY

"Like father, like son," is the rule of the Pollitt family. Big Daddy, like Brick, is the sort of man who inspires admiration and adoration without doing much of anything to deserve it. He worked hard for economic success, and now he wants to enjoy it. He is uninterested in his wife and treats her cruelly, belittling her love and that of his other son, Gooper. He sees himself in Brick, however, and therefore Brick is the only person for whom he feels love.

BIG MAMA

She is an older version of Maggie – more hysterical, sloppier, needier, having let herself go, but still like Maggie. She loves her husband unconditionally despite his cruelty and indifference. She loves both her sons but she cannot help but prefer Brick, who is so much like his father. Her outbursts are a willful effort to avoid the truth about Big Daddy's health – she is a bit cleverer than she lets on, though not much.

GOOPER

The elder of the Pollitt children by eight years has languished in Brick's shadow since the day his brother was born. While Brick got the attention with looks and football, Gooper married into society and became a successful lawyer. But the continued focus on his ne'er-do-well brother has turned Gooper bitter and mean as well as paranoid, and so it is out of both greed and spite that he actively campaigns for control of Big Daddy's estate.

MAE

Gooper's wife has picked up his bitterness and greed, without any of his justifying history. She taunts Maggie's barrenness by parading her own substantial brood around the house, and considers herself to be Maggie's superior both socially and within the context of the Pollitt family. She is indiscreet and petty, and brings out the worst in her husband.

Dr. BAUGH

The family doctor shows sensitivity and discreetness, allowing the brothers to make their own decision about when and whether to tell Big Mama and Big Daddy about the patriarch's terminal condition (or, perhaps, shirking that responsibility himself).

REVEREND TOOKER

The clergyman indelicately makes frequent reference to parish donations and needed repairs while hovering around the Pollitt estate, campaigning for a mention in Big Daddy's will. He displays a particular lack of taste and tact.

16.4 SUMMARY

On a single summer evening, the Pollitt family gathers to celebrate the birthday of patriarch Big Daddy. On the previous evening, Big Daddy's son Brick broke his leg while trying to jump hurdles at the school track. His wife Margaret chides him for his foolish behavior and his constant state of drunkenness, but mostly she is trying to impress – and seduce – her husband. Brick has refused to sleep with Maggie ever since his friend Skipper died. Maggie desperately wants Brick to sleep with her – both to satisfy her own physical needs, and because she wants to get pregnant.

Maggie feels a particularly urgent need to have a baby because she needs to produce an heir. Big Daddy is dying, although he has not been told this yet, and he does not have a will. Maggie is terribly afraid of being poor, so she wants to make sure that she and Brick have a secure place in Big Daddy's will. In order to do so, however, she must contend with Brick's brother Gooper and his wife's significant brood of children.

Brick, for his part, is too numb with liquor to care much about anything. He makes clear that he is disgusted by Maggie and completely uninterested in anything she has to say. The only thing that rises him to emotion is the topic of Skipper. He and Brick were best friends, but Maggie thinks their relationship was a bit more than that. She called Skipper out on his attraction to her husband, and to prove her wrong Skipper slept with her. Both Maggie and Skipper, however, were making love to one another in lieu of Brick. Shortly thereafter, Skipper began to self-destruct, and soon died. This is the point at which Brick turned to liquor as well.

They are interrupted by the arrival of more family members. Everyone but Big Daddy and Big Mama knows that Big Daddy is dying, but he and his wife were told by the doctor that he just had a spastic colon. Tonight, the sons will tell their mother the truth.

After a round of happy birthday, the older couple is left alone. Big Daddy is cruel to Big Mama, who insists that she loves him even though he doesn't believe her. He is frustrated that she has taken charge of the estate since he became sick, but now that he knows that his days are no longer numbered (he thinks) he is going to take it all back and return Big Mama to her place.

Big Mama leaves and Big Daddy summons Brick. Big Daddy tries to open up to Brick, but his son isn't interested in talking. The older man persists in making an effort at communication, telling stories about his travels in Europe and how horrible poverty is. He worked hard to get where he is now, financially, and now that he is free of cancer, he is going to enjoy his wealth properly. Big Daddy speaks of taking on a mistress – Big Mama never interested him.

Brick, however, does interest him. He tries to coerce his son into admitting why he drinks, eventually stealing his crutch and knocking him to the ground. With some effort, Big Daddy zeros in on the truth – that it all comes back to Skipper. The night that Skipper and Maggie slept together, Skipper called Brick and tried to make an admission. Brick hung up on him, because he was entirely incapable of even allowing the possibility of homosexuality into his outlook. It is this disgust with himself and with his world that drove Brick to the bottle.

In his fury about being confronted with the truth of his relationship with Skipper, Brick tells Big Daddy that he has cancer. Big Daddy leaves, upset, and the rest of the family enters. With difficulty, Big Mama is told that Big Daddy has cancer, although she refuses to believe it at first. She tells Maggie that Brick has to get his act together, so that he can take care of the estate when Big Daddy is gone.

Mae and Gooper pounce on this, and they produce legal papers that would establish a will favorable to their interests. They try to convince Big Mama that this arrangement is for the best, due to Brick's alcoholism and Maggie's childlessness. Maggie takes this as her cue and announces grandly that she is with child. Her brother- and sister-in-law don't believe her for a second, but Big Mama rejoices in the good news, and leaves to tell Big Daddy.

Maggie and Brick are left alone. He says she was very bold to make that lie, but Maggie intends to turn the lie into truth. She takes away Brick's liquor, and says that she will not get him any more drinks until he consents to sleep with her. Big Mama runs in, searching for the morphine that the doctor left for Big Daddy – the pain has set in. She leaves, and as the play ends, Maggie tells Brick that she loves him as Brick wonders "wouldn't it be funny if that were true?"

16.5 THEMES

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MENDACITY

Brick claims he drinks to escape mendacity and lies, but there is no escape from falsehood in the Pollitt family. Brick is lying to himself about the nature of his relationship with Skipper and his culpability in Skipper's self-destruction and death. Maggie lies to the family about the quality of her relationship with Brick, and everyone lies to Big Daddy about his health. These lies permeate the characters, so that we see clearly how a lie forces a person to split into two or three different individuals, depending who is present.

UNREQUITED LOVE

The Pollitt men have a tendency to inspire love that cannot be required, including love that dare not speak its name. Maggie and Big Mama both love their husbands passionately and fruitlessly, as they are incapable of returning their affections. Skipper's love for Brick was unrequited as well, by necessity, as Brick was incapable of allowing himself to consider the possibility of a romantic attachment to his friend. Even between the Pollitt men, Big Daddy loves Brick but Brick is too soggy with liquor to reciprocate.

RIVALRY

There are several intense rivalries in the Pollitt family, as individuals and couples clamor for the attention and love of the aloof Pollitt men. Gooper and Brick's sibling rivalry is largely one-sided, as Brick has no need to engage in the fight Gooper lost the contest for his parents' affection the day Brick was born. Instead, the brother's view for a place in their father's will, if not his heart. This rivalry is then foisted on to their wives, who compete mercilessly to see who the better and worthier daughter-in-law is.

POISON

Both Big Daddy's cancer and Brick's alcoholism are characterized not merely as illnesses, but as poisons - something that spreads and contaminates from the inside. The cancer eats away at Big Daddy's body while the alcohol eats away at Brick's soul. The poison theme is addressed explicitly but less literally by Maggie, when she speaks of "venomous thoughts and words in hearts and minds" as the poison devouring the entire Pollitt family.

PROXIES

An emotional proxy is an important tool for a playwright - a correlative object allows an emotion or struggle to be represented visually and theatrically. Williams takes this a step further in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by making his characters conscious of their proxies - in particular, Maggie and Skipper each sleeps with the

other as a proxy for Brick. Brick, meanwhile, adopts liquor as a proxy for feeling and remembering, and Maggie transparently uses the excuse of a "ticking biological clock" to justify her need for financial security and sexual gratification.

DIFFICULTY OF COMMUNICATION

Big Daddy complains frequently about how difficult it is to speak plainly about hard subjects. He is not alone in this frustration - Maggie also struggles to get through to her non-communicative husband, who is desperately trying to repress the memory of the friend whose communication attempt he rejected. The click in Brick's head when he has drunk enough symbolizes his peace of mind - that is, the moment that he is able to fully detach from the world, and at which communication with him becomes truly impossible.

BLACKMAIL

A popular manipulation technique in the Pollitt family is blackmail and emotional ransom. In particular, everyone tries to control Brick through holding ransom the two things he most requires in order to function his crutch, and his liquor. Big Daddy knocks Brick to the ground and holds his crutch ransom until he admits why he drinks. Maggie flushes Brick's liquor down the toilet, and won't provide more until he consents to sleep with her. And the control of the Pollitt estate is also effectively held random until Maggie can produce an heir.

16.6 SYMBOLS

We should note the following symbolic objects in *Cat.* First, Brick and Maggie's bed the place where, as Big Mama will subsequently observe, the rocks in their marriage lie belongs to the plantation's original owners, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello. As Williams writes, the ghost of the men's love haunts the stage.

Second a gloriously grotesque console, combining a radio-phonograph, television, and liquor cabinet, towers over the room. As Williams's notes, it serves as shrine to the "comforts and illusions" behind which we hide from the things the characters face. Notice the moments when Brick will turn on the radio, refresh his drink, thereby raising a screen between him and the household.

Finally we should note Brick's phallic crutch. Its removal at the hands of Maggie and Big Daddy symbolize Brick's castration, a castration concomitant with the revelation of his unmanly homosexual desires. This crippling of the most masculine of men is crucial to Brick's "sexiness." The crutch's continuous restoration and removal—in a sort of game of "now he has it, now he doesn't"—appeals to the fetishistic one.

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16.7 GLOSSARY

Antipathetic : opposed, averse, or contrary

Chronic : constant, habitual

Composure: serene, self-controlled state of mind

Conceive : to become pregnant

Contrapuntal : two or more relatively independent melodies played together

Deliquescence : the act of melting away or disappearing into nothing

Detachment : aloofness, as from worldly affairs

Disavow: to disown or repudiate

Disclosure: a revelation or exposure

Evanescent: vanishing, fading away

Evasive: intentionally vague or ambiguous

Facile : easily accomplished or attained

Fatuous : inanely foolish and unintelligent

Ferocity : a ferocious quality or state

Grimace: a contorted facial expression

Grotesque : odd or unnatural, fantastically ugly

Lapse : break, gap

Liturgical : of or relating to religious service and worship

malignant (cancer) : a tumor of uncontrolled growth, metastatic

mendacity :untruthfulness, falsehood

mirth : humor

notorious : widely and unfavorably known

obstruction : something that blocks or closes up with an obstacle

penetrate : to pierce or pass through

pretense : pretending or feigning, make-believe

pulverize : to reduce to dust

smoldering : to show signs of repressed anger, hatred, or lust

sodomy : copulation with a member of the same sex

spastic : characterized by spasms

terminal : fatal, mortal

trough: a long box used chiefly for feeding animals

16.8 STUDY QUESTIONS

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What is the significance of the play's title?

The "cat on a hot tin roof" refers to a particular fantasy of femininity and feminine desire familiar to Williams's readers. The play's primary cat is Maggie, a hysterical, dissatisfied heroine who prostrates herself before a "brick" of a man. She jitters on her hot roof, ever uncertain of if she can stay on. Maggie's loneliness, a loneliness that lies in Brick's refusal to recognize her desire, has made her a cat—hard, nervous, and bitchy. The exhilaration of Williams's dramaturgy largely lies in the force of the audience's identification with his gorgeous heroine—a heroine desperate in her sense of lack, a heroine bound to a man who do not want her, a heroine who would appear all the more beautiful in her envy, longing, and dispossession.

What is Maggie's role in the triangle she shares with Brick and Skipper?

Maggie sketches the triangle between Brick and Skipper in her recitation in Act I. As this recitation makes clear, the only true love in Brick's life lies between him and his friend Skipper. Maggie has spent her life accompanying the two football heroes for the benefit of the publics he has been the consummate the trophy wife.

In contrast, Brick and Skipper's love assumes almost mythic dimensions. As Maggie relates, it was the stuff of Greek legend. For Brick, it remains the only true and good thing in his life. As Maggie notes, however, theirs was a love that dare not speak its name, a love that could not be satisfied or discussed. Brick's refusal to acknowledge this love led to Skipper's death.

Thus, in a strange shift in the triangle, Maggie and Skipper find themselves aligned in their longing for a man they both cannot have. Much to the jealous Brick's dismay, they pair off upon his hospitalization for a back injury. Note the ambiguity in Brick's confession of jealousy: it remains unclear which of the two he covets. Ultimately Maggie betrays the triangle's laws of silence and demands that Skipper either leave Brick alone with her or make him let him confess his desire. The two then sleep together to dream that Brick is theirs.

The final turn of the triangle excludes Maggie anew. Upon Skipper's death, Brick falls into mourning, withdrawing from the world in grief. His mourning is made all the more difficult by a desire he cannot avow. The dead man continues to intervene between husband and wife, and Maggie's protests that she is alive are in vain. Indeed, for Brick, Maggie's only place is as scapegoat. Maggie is to blame for disrupting the initial triangle and causing Skipper's ruin. She planted the idea of sodomy in poor Skipper's head. She led him to sleep with her. She ultimately caused his death.

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Compare and contrast the endings of Williams' original *Cat* and the *Cat* produced for the big screen.

Cat borrows greatly from conventional melodrama, a genre consisting of stock characters and soap operatic plots that hinge on romantic intrigue and end in the restoration of the happy home. Though making use of melodrama's high emotionalism, exhilarating histrionics, and other devices often considered to be in "bad taste," *Cat*'s rather dismal ending, involving the total demystification of the family, makes its departure from this genre clear. In this respect, *Cat*'s cinematic adaptation diverges sharply from its original version.

At the end of the play, Mama invests all her future hopes in Brick fulfilling Big Daddy's dream and becoming a family man. The responsibilities of fatherhood would somehow stop his drinking, and the estate could go to the rightful heir. The idyllic fantasy of the family restored, and is yet another of the play's lies. This lie belongs to Maggie, who invents her pregnancy. Here, Maggie becomes her most desperate, bribing her husband with liquor to conceive a child. Brick has nothing to say in return, remaining a broken man, deep in mourning for his beloved Skipper, wracked with guilt over his friend's death and the unspeakable desire between them, disgusted by his inability to confront their love. He has withdrawn depressively from the world.

In contrast to this rather dismal ending, MGM's *Cat* shows a Brick reformed through a more extended, and rather trite, heart-to-heart with Big Daddy. Though in many ways Williams's text continues to assert itself in spite of the revisions, Brick's drinking comes to rest not in his love for Skipper but in his refusal to grow up and accept responsibility. In turn, Brick teaches Daddy that he has spent his life invested in accumulating things and never loved people enough. Upon this conversation, he presents himself as Daddy's rightful heir and husband to Maggie anew, ordering her upstairs so they can make love. Gooper restrains Mae and respectfully withdraws from the scene. Thus the restoration of family and marriage, sealed by the promise of a son, resolves the play. The lie of conventional mores is what makes the Hollywood ending possible.

16.9 ESSAY QUESTIONS

Characterize the relationship between the Pollitt brothers.

Brick is eight years the junior of Gooper, and has always been coddled and adored as the baby of the family. There is a sibling rivalry, but it is entirely one-sided. Gooper is threatened by the universal adoration for Brick and resents his little brother's ability to succeed and be loved without doing anything to deserve it. Brick, on the other hand, barely notices Gooper's existence. As in all Brick's relationships, it is the other party who has the strong emotions.

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A recent Broadway production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* broke from tradition by having an entirely African American cast. How would the play be different if Williams had intended the characters to be African-American?

Most significantly, it is difficult to imagine a black planter achieving Big Daddy's sort of financial success in the mid-century South. Accompanying that, the tensions and conflicts of the play are entirely internal to the family there are no outside threats. In this time and place, a wealthy black family with questionable lines of inheritance would face an entirely different set of social and legal pressures regarding the land and wealth. To deal with these issues, the production in question moved the time frame of the play to an unspecified later period, in which their race would not affect their wealth.

Maggie thinks that announcing her pregnancy will solve all her problems. Is she right?

Quite possibly. The one thing holding Brick and Maggie back from full possession of the Pollitt estate after Big Daddy's death is their lack of an heir – if Big Daddy thinks that a baby is on the way when he's writing his will, that concern will be eliminated. But Maggie also knows that a sham pregnancy can't last long without being found out or proven true, so she is banking on Brick's obligation to make the lie a truth, in order to satisfy her own desire. The question now is whether Brick will be willing to or physically capable of pushing through his haze of liquor and disgust for successful procreation.

Tennessee Williams chose to compress the staged action of this play into a single night, but the story itself has a much longer range. When does this story begin and end?

The story begins with the death of Skipper – or perhaps even the night Maggie and Skipper sleep together. It encompasses Brick's ensuing ennui and Maggie's growing desperation; the years of Big Daddy's illness; and the night shown in the play itself. The ending, we can surmise, comes if and when Maggie does have a baby, or when Big Daddy signs his will. But by compressing the action to a single night, Williams succeeds in heightening emotions and forcing the confrontations and angry truths that result in good drama.

Compare and contrast Big Daddy and Brick.

The men are portrayed as similar in their relationships to their wives. Both Big Daddy and Brick are married to women who adore and worship them, but who they can't stand. It is their very insouciance, in fact, that makes the women love them. Likewise, both appear to be capable of expressing true affection for only one person – Big Daddy for Brick, and Brick for Skipper. It is the tragedy of the play that none of the affections are mutual. Big Daddy is just as thwarted in his love for his son as Maggie is.

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"It is so damn hard for people to talk to each other," Big Daddy says repeatedly, yet many plain and hurtful words are said in this play. How does Williams manipulate his characters into really talking to one another, when they otherwise would not?

Brick's silence is a tool by the playwright to allow Maggie and Big Daddy to express some deeply personal and hurtful truths because he is so unresponsive, they each are able to monologue in his presence, almost like an aria in an opera, as though he weren't really there. Brick, on the other hand, is made truthful by liquor, and Gooper and Mae by overwhelming greed. Big Daddy and Big Mama are also forced to speak plainly by the prospect of death, forcing into the open thoughts and feelings that would otherwise go unsaid.

Why does Williams give his hero an injury?

Crippling Brick serves a thematic role as well as being a plot and staging device. On the most basic level, Brick hobbling around the stage on his crutch keeps the long conversations visually interesting, and gives the actor something to work with. As a plot device, Brick's escapades at the school track force everyone's awareness of his alcohol problem. But it also externalizes how Brick his emotionally crippled since the death of Skipper the damage done to his psyche is just as profound, real, and debilitating as a broken leg.

Where does Mae fit into the family? Why does she feel threatened?

Mae married into the Pollitt clan, going from a family with social standing but no money to a family with plenty of cash and a lack of class. But she's a striver, and wants to ensure that the money heads eventually in the direction of her brood. On the one hand, she feels like she has more of a claim to being a part of the family than Maggie has, because she has a passel of children who are bonafide Pollitt's. Yet she still feels threatened by Maggie's obviously likability and the general preference the parents have for Brick and Maggie over Gooper and Mae.

Could *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* be rewritten to take place today, or have social structures changed too much?

In 1955, when the play was first produced, the majority of women did not work outside the home. Maggie and Mae would have been fully dependent on their husband's wealth, with their only contribution to the advancement of their family being in the form of child-bearing. More to the point is the issue of Brick and Skipper's possible homosexuality – could a man still closet himself to death? Sadly, the answer is yes. Although in many areas the story of Brick and Skipper would be absurd self-delusion, there are still plenty of people who, like Brick, were so thoroughly indoctrinated into a belief in the unnaturalness of homosexuality that they just cannot accept the possibility. Perhaps if we give it another generation, their sad story will no longer be possible.

NOTES

The entire play takes place in one unbroken stretch of time, in one room, with an infrequently rotating cast of characters. As the theater is fundamentally a visual medium, how does Williams vary the action and keep things visually interesting?

In short – he doesn't. *Cat* is a very difficult play to stage effectively, because of the extreme compression of time and place. The first act is an unbroken conversation between two people, and the second act is mostly an unbroken conversation between two people. But in each pair, one person is Brick, the crippled drunk. The action of Brick hobbling back and forth to the bar, and the various attempts by Maggie and Big Daddy to steal Brick's crutch and physically manipulate him, give a director something to work with in terms of the staging. The frequent interruptions by other characters are also of assistance. But in the end, the burden of creating a visually interesting piece of drama and of fully utilizing the space is left entirely to the cast and director.

16.10 SUGGESTED ESSAY TOPICS

1. Consider the use of anecdote in the play. What is the thematic significance of the stories Maggie tells to Brick in Act I?
2. What fantasies of race appear in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof?* You may want to consider, for example, Daddy's memories of Morocco and Barcelona, the role of the house servants, and the children's Indian costumes.
3. In a stage note from Act II, Williams observes that Maggie and Big Daddy are the only characters with a sense and appreciate for the grotesque. Discuss the role of the grotesque in the play. What is its thematic significance? What is its relation to the play's use of humor?
4. Discuss Williams's use of off-stage sound. Examples include the telephone conversations, and the shrieks of the children.
5. Discuss Williams's use of the interruption. Who interrupts, when, and why? Consider in particular Brick's extended dialogue with Maggie and Big Daddy, respectively.
6. Consider Williams's use of lighting. How does color, for example, function in the play? Try not to read for lighting's symbolic significance alone (i.e. "the color green symbolizes").
7. Why does Williams cripple his hero? How does Brick's injury function in the play? Consider his recount of the event and how various characters make use of it.